Breaking Out of the House of Silence:

Female Voices and Trauma in Arab Women's Anglophone Fiction

By Diana Shahin

A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham

for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of English, Drama and Creative Studies

College of Arts and Law

University of Birmingham

October 2023

Abstract

This thesis explores how female silence in Arab anglophone fiction functions paradoxically as a way of giving voice to women's experiences, with speech and silence posited as reciprocal and constitutive parts of subjective expression. Five different novels by Arab women writers are examined and I argue that these utilise a similar range of narrative structures, framing strategies and themes that circumvent repression and marginalisation and allow for an alternative articulation of women's dreams, desires and consciousness. The study finds a nuanced contrast between oppressive and communicative silences influenced by factors such as patriarchal power and gendered body politics, and explores how silence can become a means of introspection, self-preservation, resistance, observation or detachment.

I begin by locating the communicative function of silence within the frameworks of Bakhtinian polyphony, Diane Herndl's conception of feminist dialogism and Arab women's writing. The diversity and power of these women's voices bring to the fore a heterogenous Arab female identity. The following chapters explore the shifting meanings and implications of female silence in the texts. Chapter one, 'Embodying the Woman-Snake: Introspective Silence in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*', explores Raja Alem's portrayal of the transformative nature of women's language and bodies and how silence is used to enact a spiritual journey that affirms female embodiment, empowerment and identity. The second chapter, 'Women Behind Bars: Silence and Self-Preservation in *The Golden Chariot'*, examines how Salma Bakr's 'new language' of feminine linguistic duality expresses women's traumatic experiences, disrupting typical gender binaries and reclaiming agency through testimonies in the all-female space of a prison. 'A Voice from Hell: Silence and Resistance in *Woman at Point Zero*' investigates the relationship between female bodies, agency and silence in Nawal El Saadawi's novel, allowing for the amplification and dissemination of female voices to challenge systematic abusive male

authority. The contrast between dominant male narratives and female counter-narratives is explored in the fourth chapter, 'Outsider, Madwoman, Exile: Narratives of Female Silence in *Pillars of Salt*', as Fadia Faqir portrays the divergence of the male and female gaze and the creation of female counter-spaces. Chapter five, 'Iron-Jawed Women: Hiding Behind Silence in *Mornings in Jenin*', examines how, in Susan Abulhawa's novel, silence becomes a protective defence mechanism in the face of individual and collective trauma, offering a new way of mapping the relationship between female voices and Palestinian identity in the face of displacement. Finally, the thesis ends with a conclusion that ties together the different threads of the chapters and considers the link between female voices, death and immortality.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisory team for all their invaluable patience, support, advice and feedback throughout this journey. Thank you, Professor Peter Morey, for always having just the right analogy to motivate me, always encouraging me to play to my strengths and always hearing me. Thank you, Dr. Amy Burge, for always asking the insightful questions that invariably guided me toward a more expansive yet nuanced view.

Words cannot express my gratitude towards my family. Thank you, Baba, for always, always being there for me and encouraging me to pursue knowledge, even when it seems like I am 'just reading stories'. Thank you, Mum, for being my best role model on how to love with a kind and open heart. Thank you, Nashat, my better half, my constant companion and champion. You believed in me even when I doubted myself. You were with me every step of the way on this wonderful challenging journey, and I will always be grateful for your sacrifices and support. Thank you, my star Suha, my princess Zainab and my happy boy Basim. You keep me grounded when my head fills up with too many words, and watching you grow into who you are today has been one of the greatest joys of my life. I am blessed to be your mother. Thank you to my beautiful sisters, for listening to my complaints and always managing to be inspirational, and to my brothers, for remembering to check on your big sister. My love for you all is without measure.

Contents

Preliminary Notes

The Arabic and Farsi spelling of the name of the main character in *The Thousand and One Nights*, is used: Shahrazad. Where it appears otherwise, it is due to the spelling adopted by other critics.

Names of Arab authors written in English are given in the most common form in which they appear. For example, I use the spelling Nawal El Saadawi, and where it appears otherwise, it is due to the spelling used by other critics.

The Arabic transliteration system used does not include diacritics unless adopted in quoted material.

The translation of the names of characters from the novels is based on my own understanding and interpretation.

Introduction

The Voice of Trauma: Arab Women's Silences in Anglophone Fiction

> Within the context of women's speech silence has many faces […] Silence is commonly set in opposition with speech. Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored.[1]

Arab women have often been stereotypically associated with oppression and subjugation in the West, their voices perceived as silent due to the dominant patriarchal hierarchies and religious order of the societies in which they live. However, this stereotype can be seen to perpetuate the silencing of women as it effectively diminishes their voices—as Amira Jarmakani explains: 'Arab women are perceived to be silent and submissive according to the mythology of the veil […] We are not merely silenced; we are […] ontologically elided, by sensationalized news stories and images of oppressed and exoticized Arab women'.[2] This vision of the 'exotic' veiled and silenced Arab woman is one that elucidates both fascination and pity in the West, which perhaps fuels the efforts of Arab women writers to challenge their misrepresentation.

In the Arab world, female silence carries positive connotations in terms of gendered social norms and even religious rules of conduct that align with patriarchal values. Within this cultural framework, female silence is positioned as a sign of modesty and virtue. For example, "*al-sukoot 'alamat al-ridha*" is a common Arabic saying that roughly translates into "silence is a sign of consent" and is often used in social situations where women feel—or are believed to feel—too inhibited or shy to speak up, such as when giving consent to an arranged marriage.

---

[1] Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference', in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*, ed. by Gloria Anzaldúa (San Fransisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), pp. 371–75, pp. 372-73.

[2] Amira Jarmakani, 'Arab American Feminisms: Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility', in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*, ed. by Evelyn Asultany, Nadine Naber, and Rabab Abdulhadi (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), pp. 227–41, pp. 236-37.

This interpretation of silence is also reflected in Fadia Faqir's claim that 'Arab girls are moulded to be pleasant, obedient, silent and good housekeepers', with social conditions that 'lead women to develop a mainly silent public persona'.[3] Furthermore, a common misconception amongst Muslims themselves is that a woman's voice is part of her '*awra*—an Arabic term that refers to that which is shameful and must be hidden or covered up, such as the private parts of the body.[4] This association perpetuates the cultural myth that women should be neither heard nor seen—a woman's voice is seen as an extension of her body, and perhaps it is this link to female sexuality that leads to the perception of female self-expression as negative or even shameful.

This study examines the depiction of female silence in different examples of Arab fiction written by women to establish a clearer view of how silence can manifest as a form of communication and resistance. A textual analysis of five novels reveals that, while certain features and themes are held in common, the voicing of Arab women's experiences of trauma, in particular, is varied and diverse. These novels are *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* by Raja Alem, *The Golden Chariot* by Salwa Bakr, *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi, *Pillars of Salt* by Fadia Faqir and *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa. In these texts, female silence is initially aligned with absence, lack and disempowerment, stemming from stereotypical binary oppositions that govern gendered power differentials. However, such views disregard the functionality of silence as itself a form of speech act, which—in turn—allows for a more nuanced interpretation of silence within different contexts. Furthermore, silence appears in two forms: as an oppressive silencing *and* as a conscious choice with dialogic dimensions—which

---

[3] Fadia Faqir, 'Conclusion', in *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. by Fadia Faqir, trans. by Shirley Eber (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 159–80, p. 165, p. 167.

[4] For further details on the etymological and cultural interpretations of '*awra*, see: Lindsey Moore, *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 13, and Anna Ball, 'Between '*Awra* and Arab Literary Feminism Sexual Violence and Representational Crisis in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*', in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, ed. by Sorcha Gunne and Zoe Brigley Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 71–84, p. 73.

aligns with Minh-ha's view of the 'many faces' of silence. In her essay 'Not You/Like You', she considers identity in terms of dominance, arguing that difference can function as either a tool of creativity to question forms of repression or as a tool of segregation to exert power on the basis of sexual essences, giving the example of female silence as subversive when 'it frees itself from the male-defined context of absence, lack, and fear as feminine territories'.[5] In this study, I show how the female authors and characters of these novels subvert oppressive silence from a male-defined context and use it for their own ends.

This study breaks new ground by utilising a feminist textual strategy to interpret female silence and its link to trauma in the context of fiction written by Arab women. In particular, I employ a feminist reading of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on polyphony and dialogism to establish women's silence as a form of communication that represents different levels of meaning. As Dale Bauer and Susan McKinstry claim, dialogism 'is central to feminist practice because it invites new possibilities for activism and change'.[6] These possibilities guide the questions that this research seeks to answer. How does silence, as an implicit polyphonic or dialogic 'voice', manifest in the works of Arab women? How can these depictions of female silence contribute to an understanding of Arab women's experiences and their own conception of voicing and identity? What is the relationship between silence, female bodies and 'feminine' language? How does trauma influence female silence? What are the defining traumatic experiences that impact the characters' silences and how do these tie in with the overall national, cultural and social contexts of the texts? What narrative devices do the authors use to explore silence and its communicative potential? How do the structural and formal qualities of the

[5] Minh-ha, 1990, p. 373.
[6] Dale Bauer and Susan McKinstry, 'Introduction', in *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, ed. by Dale Bauer and Susan McKinstry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 1–6, p. 2.

novels engage with, and sometimes challenge, traditional patriarchal modes of narrating Arab women's experiences?

Traditionally, speech and silence are placed at opposite ends of the spectrum, but the relationship between the two is more complex. For example, Muriel Saville-Troike states that 'communicative behavior consists of both sounds and silences […] adequate description and interpretation of the process of communication requires that we understand the structure, meaning, and functions of silence as well as of sound'.[7] Silence, then, performs a communicative role that is analogous to speech, and one cannot be understood without the other. However, in 'Silence as Gesture: Rethinking the Nature of Communicative Silences', Kris Acheson discusses the tendency of Western scholarship to perceive speech and silence as dichotomous, with speech trapped in a position of primacy and silence negatively perceived as lack or as a void in which speech occurs, a phenomenon she dubs 'silence-as-frame'.[8] Acheson refutes this interpretation, arguing that silence is 'as like speech as it is different' and that the two have the capacity to exist in 'a paradox of simultaneous opposition and correspondence *because they both constitute signs in a semiotic system*'.[9] Exploring how the writers in this study represent this paradox in their works can help foster a better understanding of the function of silence, especially as a communicative tool that can represent gender roles and express female agency.

Therefore, within the context of this study, understanding silence also necessitates understanding what *is* being said by the female characters in the novels and how. Specifically, from a feminist postcolonial perspective, Jane L. Parpart and Swati Parashar argue that, in order

---

[7] Muriel Saville-Troike, 'The Place of Silence in an Integrated Theory of Communication', in *Perspectives on Silence*, ed. by Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike (New Jersey: Ablex, 1985), pp. 3–18, p. 4.
[8] Kris Acheson, 'Silence as Gesture: Rethinking the Nature of Communicative Silences', *Communication Theory*, 18.4 (2008), 535–55 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2008.00333.x>, p. 536.
[9] Acheson, 2008, p. 538, p. 543 (author's emphasis).

to build a more grounded and nuanced understanding of silence, gendered practices and inequalities that are impacted by cultural, socioeconomic and political institutions need to be considered.[10] In these novels, the binary of speech/silence and other traditional associations are disrupted, and there are female characters that are *both* speaking and silent, passive and proactive, powerful and weak, subjects and objects—sometimes at the same time. Vanessa Guignery argues that 'silence is not necessarily the opposite of speech, and needs not be equated to absence, lack, block, withdrawal or blank […] but may be seen as a wilful decision not to say or else to unsay'.[11] For the women in this study, silence becomes a choice that conveys meaning and allows them to reclaim their voices and thus gain a sense of agency. I show how silence shifts from an oppressive absence or lack that is enforced by patriarchal hierarchies to a communicative act that reflects Minh-ha's view of silence, 'as a language of its own'.[12] I argue, then, that female silence is an integral part of women's voices, a part that—in the absence of sanctioned speech—may be their only voice. Silence is thus both a voice and a 'language' that they can make their own, allowing women to convey meaning and establish some form of dialogue, especially with other women.

I extrapolate that silence is a part of the polyphonic and dialogic voices in novelistic discourse. In 'Discourse in the Novel', Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the dialogic nature of the novel, claiming that it 'is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice'.[13] This view of multiplicity in speech and voices is an important one that is closely linked to

---

[10] Jane L. Parpart and Swati Parashar, 'Introduction: Rethinking the Power of Silence in Insecure and Gendered Sites', in *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency in Contested Gendered Terrains: Beyond the Binary*, ed. by Jane L. Parpart and Swati Parashar (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–15, p. 4.

[11] Vanessa Guignery, 'Introduction: So Many Words, So Little Said', in *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English*, ed. by Vanessa Guignery (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2009), pp. 1–8, p. 2.

[12] Minh-ha, 1990, p. 373.

[13] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 261.

another Bakhtinian concept, that of polyphony, which is coined in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* as '[a] plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices'.[14] Therefore, the form of the novel is one that privileges voicing due to its proliferation of different voices that provide the potential for dialogue. This multiplicity of form allows for different interpretations of what constitutes a 'valid' voice. Within this study, the terms polyphonic and dialogic are used almost interchangeably as David Lodge argues that, in Bakhtinian thought, ''polyphonic' is virtually synonymous with 'dialogic' [...] any discourse in which more than one accent or tone is brought into play makes apparent the essentially dialogic nature of language itself'.[15] This framework helps to establish silence as a valid component of voices, a complement to speaking, especially when considering Uma Viswanathan's delineation of polyphony:

> It encompasses not only the transcribed dialogues among the various characters, but also the implicit voices of the characters. That is, the thoughts and consciousnesses of the different characters, the explicit or implicit voices of the author, and even the voice of the reader(s) who engage in a dialogue with the novel.[16]

A plurality and multiplicity of identities and voices, both implicit and explicit, each in dialogue with one another, are key components of the novel, allowing for an intricate communicative process to take place between character, narrator, author and reader.

This interpretation reveals how the novel replicates authentic human interaction through its network of voices that take on different forms and its communicative functionality. As polyphony encompasses both implicit and explicit voices, the direct speech and dialogue of a novel's characters and narrator(s) are not all that warrant consideration. The underlying voice

---

[14] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. by Caryl Emerson, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 6.
[15] David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 86.
[16] Uma Viswanathan, 'Polyphony of Midnight's Children: Dispersion of Voices and Genres in *Midnight's Children*', *Acta Scientiarum: Language and Culture*, 32.1 (2010), 51–59, p. 51.

of the author is just as significant, and implicit voicing is also represented by the actions, body language and unspoken words of the characters. Therefore, I posit that, within the context of the polyphonic novel, silence represents implicit voicing and can also be classified as a non-verbal act as it communicates meaning through modes other than speaking. Thus emerges a more complete definition of silence: it is a non-verbal speech act that complements speech itself; it is one of the implicit voices within the polyphony of novelistic discourse; and it is a form of unconventional discourse that communicates meaning while also challenging dominant hierarchies. In 'The Functions of Silence', Michal Ephratt coins the term 'eloquent silence' to refer to 'an active means chosen by the speaker to communicate his or her message'.[17] I extrapolate that the instances of voluntary female silence portrayed in this study's novels are examples of eloquent silence that perform various communicative functions that align with the dialogic nature of the form.

Since the subject of this study is women—both as writers and characters—there arises the question of how this definition of silence sits within feminist critical frameworks, especially in terms of the representation of female identity and language in the polyphonic novel. For example, in 'The Dilemmas of a Feminine Dialogic', Diane Herndl examines the problematic relationship between dialogism and 'feminine' language, which she claims is, 'marked by process and change, by absence and shifting, by multivoicedness'.[18] Building on Bakhtin's definition of dialogism, Herndl describes feminine language as, 'a woman speaking man's language, expressing her intentions, but in a refracted, masculine-defined way', which she believes precludes the possibility of a truly feminine language since, 'using language at all

---

[17] Michal Ephratt, 'The Functions of Silence', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40.11 (2008), 1909–38 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.03.009>, p. 1913.

[18] Diane Price Herndl, 'The Dilemmas of a Feminine Dialogic', in *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, ed. by Dale M. Bauer and S. Jaret McKinstry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 7–24, p. 11.

means to work within a system whose terms are masculine'.[19] As a solution to this dilemma, she suggests a critical model that involves looking for 'subversive language' and 'disagreeing discourses' and analysing these to emerge with different readings that emphasise the plural meanings of a text.[20] This suggested compromise does not rule out silence as a female dialogic/polyphonic voice, but rather indicates that it can be considered a subversive use of language—or unconventional discourse.[21] Therefore, applying the concept of feminine dialogics to the instances of female silence portrayed in the texts, I indicate how these silences are subversive and interpret what they mean and how they represent women's experiences.

Studying the relationship between silence and identity within the framework of dialogism and polyphony opens up another interpretation: identity itself is dialogic. Michael Holquist explains that, in Bakhtinian thought, 'there is no one meaning being striven for: the world is a vast congeries of contesting meanings, a heteroglossia so varied that no single term capable of unifying its diversifying energies is possible'.[22] The search for identity is part of that search for meaning; there is no one uniform, singular identity that encompasses all women, all Arabs or all Arab women. However, the outlines of an identity that is diverse, rich and multiple can be established through the analysis of texts such as these. This search for identity and meaning wends its way through and alongside silence, which by virtue of its multi-faceted nature, can be a means of resistance, observation, introspection, or acquiescence. Each of these manifestations of silence is analysed in detail, and their effects on identity charted, delving into the realm of different possibilities offered by the main texts.

---

[19] Herndl, 1991, p. 16, p. 17.
[20] Herndl, 1991, p. 18.
[21] See: Veronica Stewart, 'Feminizing Bakhtin', *The Minnesota Review*, 41–42, 1993, 133–38, for a critique of Bauer and McKinstry, 1991, and the concepts of feminist dialogism posited by the editors and contributors. For example, Stewart claims that Herndl, 'invents a false dilemma for Bakhtinian feminists by imposing the feminine on dialogism', ultimately setting up an obstacle course that feminists must overcome (p. 135).
[22] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 24.

The vast diversity of the Arab world in terms of geography, climate, dialect, cuisine, socio-economic factors and political agendas clouds the issue of a universal or uniform identity for Arab women and thus impacts the voicing of that identity. For example, Marnia Lazreg criticises how '[i]ndividual Third World women are made to appear on the feminist stage as representatives of the millions of women in their own societies'.[23] Furthermore, Chandra Mohanty discusses the representation of Third World women in Western feminist discourse, pointing to 'the construction of "Third World women" as a homogeneous "powerless" group often located as implicit victims of particular socioeconomic systems'.[24] While this view of questionable representation holds merit, the use of polyphony as a theoretical framework for analysing the writings of Arab women indicates and gives space to the heterogeneity of Arab identity and Arab women's voices.

The process of writing Arab female identity is fraught with difficulties and obstacles, notwithstanding the looming spectre of misrepresentation. For example, Faqir points to the attempts of Arab women authors to, 'negotiate a textual, sexual, linguistic space for themselves within a culture that is predominantly male-dominated'.[25] Similarly, Fawzia Rashid indicates the ultimate objective of Arab women writers: 'to rectify the distorted image [of themselves] which has been replicated in many novels and films and television series, most of which are the product of male writers claiming they are most capable of portraying women's internal world'.[26] This shifts attention to the prevalence of male-constructed female characters both in Western and Arab literature and media, and the importance of any space that privileges Arab women's

---

[23] Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 10.
[24] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 23.
[25] Faqir, 1998, p. 6.
[26] Fawzia Rashid, 'Writing and the Pursuit of Female Identity', in *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. by Fadia Faqir, trans. by Shirley Eber (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 121–29, p. 127.

voices articulating their own experiences. Thus, a deciding factor in my choice of primary texts for this study was that they are novels written *by* Arab women *about* Arab women.

The novels in this study were also chosen because they feature a variety of different national contexts that reflect the tensions that influence the experiences of Arabs around the world. *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* is set in Saudi Arabia and *The Golden Chariot* and *Woman at Point Zero* in Egypt while *Pillars of Salt* and *Mornings in Jenin* are about Jordan and Palestine, respectively. Each novel reflects the variations in socioeconomic and political elements that characterise each country as well as commonalities in social structures and power differentials. Additionally, while the novels are all modern, written between 1983 and 2010, their settings collectively span the period from the 1920s to the early 2000s. This encompasses some of the most influential historical events that are ingrained in the collective Arab memory and that continue to impact the Arab world to this day, such as the rule of the British Mandate in Jordan and Palestine after the Second World War and the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Furthermore, Faqir and Abulhawa are classed as diasporic writers, with their works also reflecting the duality of Arab identity and experiences in the West. While these five works are by no means representative of all Arab women, or even women from the Arab countries from which their authors originate, they still indicate some of the similarities that influence the voicing of Arab women's identity and trauma, especially in terms of how gendered cultural norms and social hierarchies converge regardless of nationality.

While the critical reception of these five novels reflects different approaches to considering the authors and their works, there is an overarching feminist critique that explores these representations of female discourse and their significance. For example, close readings of *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* by both Ghadir Zannoun and Laila Al-Sharqi focus on the feminist revisionist dimensions of the text. Zannoun argues that the novel presents a, 'female mythology',

which allows for 'the reclamation and reinterpretation of silenced, marginalised, and demonised cultural elements of the Arabian Peninsula.[27] Al-Sharqi, on the other hand, considers how Alem employs magical realism to reclaim 'the lost/submerged identity of the female in her society by giving Saudi women the social and psychological voice they have been denied'.[28] While I, too, consider the narrative elements that privilege female discourse within this novel, my approach shifts the focus to strategic silence and how it is enhanced through the text, especially in terms of the link between female language and bodies.

The Golden Chariot is often examined in light of Bakr's experimentation with feminine language. Nadje Al-Ali claims that Bakr 'underlines the importance of changing traditional language for the benefit of women's perspectives and writings'.[29] Similarly, Caroline Seymour-Jorn delineates how Bakr 'experiments with an innovative female lexicon and with time-honored narrative strategies to explore the impact upon women of oppressive economic circumstances and restrictive gender ideologies'.[30] I extend these views with my analysis of how Bakr's 'new language' enhances her representation of women's voices and experiences while challenging normative binary oppositions, including the perception of speech and silence, through its polyphonic narrative and linguistic strategies.

The controversy around Nawal El Saadawi and her writings is often alluded to in criticism. Labelled a radical feminist activist, her voice is often amplified and, in some contexts, seen as representative of Arab feminism. For example, Amal Amireh considers the implications of the

---

[27] Ghadir K. Zannoun, 'Fantasy, Mysticism, and Eroticism in Raja Alem's *Fatma'*, *Kohl: A Journal for Gender and Body Research*, 1.2 (2015), 44–55, p. 44, p. 46.
[28] Laila Al-Sharqi, 'Magical Realism as Feminist Discourse in Raja Alem's *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*', *English Language and Literature Studies*, 6.2 (2016), 58–71 <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v6n2p58>, p. 58.
[29] Nadje Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender: The Representation of Women in a Selection of Modern Egyptian Literature* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994), p. 67.
[30] Caroline Seymour-Jorn, *Cultural Criticism in Egyptian Women's Writing* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), p. xxxviii.

reception of El Saadawi's works in the West and the Arab world, especially in terms of her feminist critique, which is 'instrumental in popularizing discourses about sexuality and women's rights'.[31] Novels like *Woman at Point Zero* explore such discourses by indicating the exploitation of women's bodies and sexuality and feature powerful female characters who are positioned to challenge normative power structures. In her introduction to this novel, Assia Djebar suggests its originality lies in, 'a look that upsets and cuts through the traditional sexual dichotomy of space, a look that impregnates so as to resist at all costs [...] Novelty resides in the tone of a voice [...] that accuses'.[32] I suggest that this cutting look and accusatory voice are linked to resistance—representing an amalgamation of speech and silence that is intricately linked to the female body. I build on this to consider how El Saadawi's authorial voice contributes to the novel's polyphony, which inherently allows the voices of marginalised women to be heard.

A feminist postcolonial approach to *Pillars of Salt* indicates the importance of Faqir's authorial voice as well as the thematic content, linguistic features and narrative structure of the novel. Lindsey Moore discusses the, 'colonial and patriarchal frameworks of confinement' in *Pillars of Salt* that necessitate 'modes of resistance that can be defined as decolonizing and feminist'.[33] I explore how these frameworks are reflected in the form of a dominant patriarchal and colonial narrative that the female characters resist and challenge through presenting their own forms of discourse. On the other hand, Diya Abdo considers the transcultural and translinguistic implications of the novel that result from the cultural displacement of Faqir as a

---

[31] Amal Amireh, 'Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World', *Signs*, 26.1 (2000), 215–49, p. 231.
[32] Assia Djebar, 'Introduction to Nawal Al-Saadawi's *Ferdaous: A Voice from Hell*', in *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. by Margot Badran and miriam cooke, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 387–93, p. 392.
[33] Moore, 2008, p. 107.

'writer in exile' and the novel's ambiguous position with its audience.[34] Suaad Alqahtani examines how Faqir's dialogic narrative 'revisits the oppression of Jordanian women from a standpoint that empowers them to fight back [...] and encourages them to never surrender to false Western representations or the hegemony of indigenous patriarchal cultural and social traditions'.[35] These approaches all inform my own analysis of the novel's defamiliarizing strategies, which include complex narrative structures and gendered counter-spaces, to present a female counter-narrative that challenges dominant hierarchies. However, I also examine how traditional storytelling paradigms are subverted in this novel to ensure that women's voices, whether strategically silent or speaking, are heard.

Unlike the other novels, a critical feminist approach is not typically applied to readings of *Mornings in Jenin*, which is often associated with Palestinian literature and trauma studies. Within this context, Eman Raslan's close reading of this novel establishes the features that mark *Mornings in Jenin* as trauma fiction and explores how its engagement with narrative memory helps to overcome trauma.[36] Ayman Abu-Shomar explores how Abulhawa's exilic consciousness influences her depiction of the experiences of both Palestinians and Israelis, arguing that this 'polyphonic novel proposes a nonpartisan stance of resistance in a world [...] controlled by relations of power'.[37] Drawing on these insights in my own reading of the novel, I consider how the polyphonic and dialogic features of the novel accommodate different forms

---

[34] Diya M. Abdo, 'How to Be a Successful Double Agent: (Dis)Placement as Strategy in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*', in *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. by Layla Al Maleh, Cross/Cultures (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), 237–69, p. 238.

[35] Suaad Alqahtani, 'Western Feminism or Return to Authentic Islam? Jordanian Women in Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* and *My Name Is Salma*', *Arab World English Journal For Translation and Literary Studies*, 1.2 (2017), 77–91 <https://doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol1no2.7>, p. 78.

[36] Iman Raslan, 'Trauma and Resistance in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*', *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, Vol. 17 (2017) 183-202, p. 184.

[37] Ayman Abu-Shomar, 'Unreconciled Strivings of "Exilic Consciousness": Critical Praxis of Resistance in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*', *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, 18.1 (2019), 101–20 <https://doi.org/10.3366/hlps.2019.0204>, p. 102.

of voicing and narrative structures that represent collective and individual experiences of trauma. Within this context, I investigate the impact of war and displacement in the construction of identity and voice for different generations of Palestinian women, with silence functioning as a coping mechanism that enables disassociation.

Considering these critical responses to the authors and their works, I find there is a gap in terms of female silence within the field of Arab anglophone literary studies. Silence is considered from different angles in Arab literature, but these considerations do not seem to factor in the communicative functions of silence and how these influence, and are influenced by, different experiences of trauma. For example, Refqa Abu-Remaileh suggests that 'writing silence' in the context of Palestinian literature entails navigating 'the realms of the unsaid and the unspeakable' and 'transcending chronology, linearity, contiguity, borders, plot, style, and genre' to knit together narratives capable of exposing invisibility and silence.[38] This interpretation, while seemingly specific to Palestinian discourse, reflects one of the overriding approaches in Arab literary studies, whereby silence is positioned as negative and synonymous with absence and lack—or something that must be exposed or broken. Much has been written about the oppressive silencing of Arab women and the use of silence to challenge or resist dominant discourses, but I find there is room to expand on how Arab women construct identity and represent traumatic experiences through the stories of their female characters. Considering female silence, in conjunction with speech, as a voice and form of communication allows for other connections to be made in terms of narrative strategies and structures, for example.

This consideration of Arab women's silence within the context of these novels leads to another question about the choice of texts in this study: why are they classed together as

[38] Refqa Abu-Remaileh, 'The Three Enigmas of Palestinian Literature', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 48.3 (2019), 21–25 <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2019.48.3.21>, p. 23.

anglophone fiction, considering the differences in source language of each work? *Pillars of Salt* and *Mornings in Jenin* were written in English while *The Golden Chariot* and *Woman at Point Zero* are originally Arabic texts, and *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* was written in English with the help of a native English-speaking collaborator. My use of the term anglophone for both categories of writing, whether originally written in English or translated from Arabic into English, is driven by the idea that the act of translating produces a hybrid text that incorporates cultural and linguistic differences but that also ultimately targets the same intended anglophone readership as those texts originally produced in English. This can be linked to the increased marketability of texts in English by so-called ethnic writers, which translates into higher demand for such works, ultimately leading to a more extensive and diverse readership and critical reception. Sarah Brouillette discusses the privileging of postcolonial literature written in English in the global marketplace, pointing to how the 'incorporation of a plurality of identities for global export' allows for claims of inclusivity and universality.[39] This signifies the demand for texts written in English, whether translations or literature originally written in the language, and it stands to reason that such demand influences those texts that are in translation, thus making the term 'anglophone literature' appropriate.

This necessitates an understanding of how the process of translation affects a text. Amith Kumar P.V. explores the 'dialogicity' of translation, arguing that the translated work 'attains a voice of its own, which can neither be categorised as an imitation of the original nor as a completely detached work'.[40] This is evident in how the translated text retains the features and elements of the original yet cannot be exactly duplicated, with the translator's voice merely

---

[39] Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), p. 58.

[40] Amith Kumar P.V., *Bakhtin and Translation Studies: Theoretical Extensions and Connotations* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2016), p. 27.

joining the polyphony of voices within the novel. The dialogicity of translation appears, for example, with *The Golden Chariot*. In the original Arabic version, the novel is entitled *Al-'araba al-dhabiyya la tus'adu ila-I-sama'* (*The Golden Chariot Does Not Ascend to Heaven*). It is unclear why the title was abbreviated in the English version of the novel, and this ambiguity led me to reach out to Manisty, who clarified: 'As to the choice of title of the English version of Salwa's novel, it was [...] the decision of the publisher for marketing purposes. I protested at the time, without success, since the meaning in its present form is all but lost'.[41] This change in title, then, not only changes the meaning of the novel by allowing for a more ambiguous potential "happy" ending, but it also reflects how the implicit and explicit voices of both the author and translator can be changed or even suppressed to increase the marketability and thus "success" of a translated work. In another sense, both texts written in English by Arabs and those translated from Arabic into English exhibit a form of cultural translation. Dallel Sarnou argues that English texts written by Arab authors caught between two cultures are dialogic because these authors have 'a double consciousness, double commitment, double perception, double linguistic competence and hence double voice'. [42] I posit that this arises from transcultural exchange and positioning as well as the process of "translating" Arab cultural experiences through writing them in English, whether this act of writing is performed by the Arab author or a translator. This doubleness can be seen as an effect of reaching beyond the Arabic audience to address the global English market.

I utilise feminist textual studies to explore how the narrative structures in the novels in this study play a part in the representation of Arab women's voices, both speaking and silent.

---

[41] Diana Shahin to Dinah Manisty, 'Hello from OCIS Library', 26 October 2022.

[42] Dallel Sarnou, 'The Polyphonic, Dialogic Feminine, Narrative Voice in Anglophone Arab Women's Writings', *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 8.3 (2016), 202–12 <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v8n3.21>, p. 210.

For example, I consider the applications of certain gynocentric frameworks that explore the articulation of female experiences. Amongst these are French feminists in the nineteen-seventies, such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who sought to, 'challenge phallocentrism and open up alternative spaces in order to articulate sexual difference', by placing emphasis on women's language and writing.[43] Cixous coined the term *l'écriture féminine*, indicating the need for language as a means to understand the self, especially in terms of the relationship between writing/language and women's bodies. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa', she claims that woman needs to write her *self*, calling for an exploration of the female body and for a language that can break down the confines of patriarchal and social hierarchies. Having existed within the discourse of man, Cixous posits, woman must break free:

> [I]t is time for her to dislocate this "within," to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.[44]

Similarly, Irigaray uses the term *parler-femme* (woman-speak) to indicate an alternate syntax that can represent the feminine and that deviates from the traditional language of men and opens up sites of sexual difference.[45] I suggest that female silence falls within the domain of such conceptualisations of language, especially since it is also inherently associated with women's bodies and their subjectivity.

Each of the novels features multiple levels of narration and different narrators, which enhances the polyphony and dialogism of the text while also pointing to the complex nature of discourse and communicative processes. There are also significant instances of female storytelling, the features of which can be traced back to the popular paradigm of Shahrazad in

---

[43] Jacqueline Taylor, 'Thinking Difference Differently: An Exploration of *l'écriture féminine*, Women's Art Practice, and Postfeminism', *Esprit Créateur*, 58.2 (2018), 41–55 <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/esp.2018.0018>, p. 41.

[44] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), 875–93, p. 887.

[45] Taylor, 2018, p. 43.

The Thousand and One Nights. For example, Wendy Faris examines Shahrazad's role as the archetypal narrator, arguing that the text itself 'contains various textual strategies for the prolongation of fictional life, strategies which reiterate stylistically the situation of Scheherazade and prefigure numerous modern literary conventions'.[46] Undeniably popular, this iconic classic features a narrative structure of ransom tales that function to postpone the death of the female storyteller, yet it also elucidates questions about the self-perception and representation of Arab identity in literature. For example, in 'Is *A Thousand and One Nights* a Boring Book?', Abdelfattah Kilito discusses the privileging of this work within European literary traditions and trends despite it not being considered 'part of the canon of classical works in Arabic'.[47] He points to the belated interest of Arab writers in this text and ends by asking: 'Would the Arabs have perceived themselves or been perceived in the same manner had this collection of tales not existed?'.[48] Extending this to my readings of the novels in this study, I thus consider the different ways in which these works adopt and adapt this female storytelling trope and how this impacts self-representation.

One of the most significant implications of the Shahrazad trope within the context of Arab women's silence is its scope for revisionist narratives.[49] For example, Hanadi Al-Samman points to how re-engaging with the trope of this cultural icon allows diasporic women writers to 'defy conventional narratives of personal and national erasure'; she also makes an argument for 'the necessity to question Shahrazad's traditional role, to modernize her narrative so that

---

[46] Wendy B. Faris, '1001 Words: Fiction Against Death', *The Georgia Review*, 36.4 (1982), 811–30, p. 815.
[47] Abdelfattah Kilito, 'Is *A Thousand and One Nights* a Boring Book?', in *Arabs and the Art of Storytelling: A Strange Familiarity*, ed. by Roger Allen, trans. by Mbarek Sryfi and Eric Sellin (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), pp. 116–25, p. 118.
[48] Kilito, 2014, p. 125.
[49] For more details on framing the Shahrazad trope within Arabic postcolonial novels, see: M. Al-Musawi, *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Leiden: BRILL, 2003)

her tales indict all the contemporary Shahrayars of the Arab world'.[50] I expand on this by showing how the paradigm of female storytellers is used to challenge dominant patriarchal narratives in Arab anglophone texts while also pointing to pre-existing or concurrent matriarchal storytelling traditions and counter-narratives. These kinds of narratives are also amplified by the use of nested stories and Arabesques, both of which reflect the nonlinearity of female time and trauma.

In *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, Susan Lanser suggests that 'different communities of women have had different degrees of access to particular narrative forms', which informs her interest in 'those female narrators who claim public authority'.[51] Furthermore, she questions narrative gender bias, arguing that 'authorial voice has been so conventionally masculine that female authorship does not necessarily establish female voice [...] the authorial mode has allowed women access to "male" authority by separating the narrating "I" from the female body'; she then indicates the 'overtly authorial practices' that establish female narrators as significant literary presences.[52] I explore how the authors in this study utilise the polyphonic and dialogic nature of the novel—as an overtly authorial practice—to establish the significance of female voices and, thus, of female agency or authority. They do so in contexts where women often feel the full weight of patriarchal power and social silencing: in prisons, asylums and hospitals. The institutionalised power differentials within such spaces parallel social hierarchies that shape female silence, yet the women in these novels are able to challenge or subvert these to establish their own female communities that facilitate dialogue and thereby allow for the voicing of different experiences. The transmission of female

---

[50] Hanadi Al-Samman, *Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writings* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), p. 3, p. 4.
[51] Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.58030>, p. 8.
[52] Lanser, 2018, p. 18.

narratives thus occurs through other women, and it is this that ensures women's voices—their speech and silences—are heard.

I maintain that each of the novels in this study utilises polyphony and dialogism to enhance the voicing of Arab women's experiences and thus constitute a form of trauma narrative and testimony. Elizabeth McKee states that 'much has been written about what women writers say or, at least, what various commentators think that they are saying, and alarmingly little has been produced within the field of Arabic literature concentrating on how they say it'.[53] The women in these novels express trauma through a melding of strategic speech and silence that communicates their experiences and ensures their narratives endure. Al-Samman discusses the moral and political obligation of Arab women writers to testify to the erasure traumas of Arab women—labelling this a form of 'narrative witnessing'—and this obligation includes resurrecting and rewriting such stories through their own narratives.[54] My approach is partly informed by this view; the authors whose works I analyse incorporate different forms of narrative witnessing in their works that nonetheless privilege female voices and allow for a more dialogic portrayal of trauma. These forms of witnessing invariably include the testimony of a character who speaks her story in her own voice, in addition to the weaving together of multiple narrative points of view, the elements of literary genres such as magical realism and repetitive structural patterns. These not only reveal how the female characters' trauma permeates their lives but also how those experiences influence their speech and silence. Laurie Vickroy claims: 'Examining fictionalized trauma scenarios allows the development of insights into subjective endurance, crisis, and conflict and shows that the defensive responses of trauma

---

[53] Elizabeth McKee, 'The Political Agendas and Textual Strategies of Levantine Women Writers', in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. by Mai Yamani (Reading: Garnet, 1996), pp. 105–39, p. 109.
[54] Al-Samman, 2015, pp. 57-58.

link many types and degrees of wounding, informing a common humanity'.[55] Thus, my analysis of trauma in these five works of fiction indicates how traumatic experiences sometimes overlap, delineating the women's choice of silence as a defensive or protective coping mechanism.

Trauma theory has increased in significance within the field of contemporary literary criticism. From a psychoanalytical viewpoint, Cathy Caruth conceptualises trauma as the 'wound that speaks', building on Freudian theories and utilising a deconstructive critical approach in her study of literary depictions of trauma.[56] She labels the story of trauma 'the narrative of a belated experience', pointing to the referential nature of trauma stories and their 'double telling', which involves oscillation between the nature of an event and the nature of its survival.[57] However, critics like Michelle Balaev refer to alternative pluralistic models of trauma that move toward 'a focus on the specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater consideration of the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience', arguing that such models generate more diverse views of the relationship between language and experience.[58] In this study, I consider the impact of Arab social and cultural environments that cultivate power differentials, facilitating the oppression of women, and how the resulting traumatic experiences are communicated through hybrid forms of language.

One of the main points of contention with the works of Caruth and her contemporaries is the supposed Euro-centric bias of these studies. Stef Craps traces how trauma theory, as a field of cultural scholarship, developed out of an engagement with Holocaust testimony, literature and history, yet the founding texts of the field—such as works by Caruth—tend to show little

---

[55] Laurie Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives: The Contemporary Novel and the Psychology of Oppression* (University of Virginia Press, 2015), p. 3.
[56] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p.8.
[57] Caruth, 1996, p. 7.
[58] Michelle Balaev, 'Literary Trauma Reconsidered', in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. by Michelle Balaev (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 1–14, p. 3.

interest in the traumatic experiences of non-Western cultural traditions.[59] In *Trauma*, Lucy Bond and Craps discuss how transnational and transcultural trends in trauma studies have led to diversification in the *kinds* of traumatic experiences now being addressed in academia, such as slavery, colonialism and apartheid.[60] This is instrumental in any consideration of Arab experiences of trauma, which are not necessarily addressed in standard Western-based trauma studies. More recently, then, there have been calls for a more global application of trauma theory, leading to an intermingling with postcolonial and cross-cultural studies. This is evident in the work of critics such as Irene Visser, who discusses the need for 'a new model for reading, understanding, and interpreting trauma that would enable more differentiated, and more culturally and historically specific notations, and would also provide ways of reading collective trauma'.[61] Such a model would allow for a more nuanced interpretation of both individual and collective experiences of trauma that goes beyond the psychological to consider the sociological, cultural and even gendered dimensions of a certain culture. I extend this model through my analysis of the external factors that shape the female characters' lives and thereby influence their experiences of trauma and how they voice them. My reading of *The Golden Chariot* reflects this, for example, as I address the impact of the Egyptian national socio-political context on the subjective instances of the female characters' trauma. This novel includes multiple references to the regimes that governed Egypt, highlighting the ripple effect of their rule on the "everywoman" represented by the female characters. I indicate how the shift in economic and educational policies from one regime to another leads to changes in consumerism and access to education and trickles down to influence social hierarchies and power politics, and thus the role

---

[59] Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 3.
[60] Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, *Trauma* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019), p. 104.
[61] Irene Visser, 'Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies', in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. by M. Balaev (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 106–29, p. 108.

of women within society. This increased anxiety as a result of this shifting of national identities often manifests in patterns of oppressive silencing.

This diversification and globalisation of trauma studies signals a more intersectional approach to trauma, especially in terms of gender and ethnicity. With regards to trauma literature, Vickroy argues:

> Gender is a significant consideration because of the PTSD statistics showing that women are more greatly affected than men, and because trauma fiction is largely, though not exclusively, written by women, who identify gender as determining the nature of victimization and reflect on the gender-specific effects of trauma on women.[62]

This indicates the link between self-identification and voicing on the one hand, and the gender-specific effects of trauma on the other. Within this context, it is important to consider that trauma does not necessarily result from, 'spectacular and instantaneous acts of violence', as posited by traditional event-based trauma theory, but the 'cumulative impact of the often subtle everyday discriminations and humiliations' of oppression can be just as profound.[63] Maria Root labels this 'insidious trauma' because such experiences are 'endemic to underclass situations that are repeated in ways that maintain situations of dominance'.[64] In dominant patriarchal discourse, then, female experiences of everyday gender-based inequity or oppression can be overlooked or even labelled exaggerated or imagined—as Laura Brown suggests, insidious trauma is contrasted with 'real' trauma.[65] Such forms of trauma are often experienced by those from marginalised groups or those with intersectional identities, such as Arab women. Kimberle Crenshaw's conceptualisation of intersectional identities in terms of gender and race suggests that certain discourses are shaped to respond, for example, to women of colour as either women

---

[62] Vickroy, 2015, p. 15.
[63] Bond and Craps, 2019, p. 108.
[64] Vickroy, 2015, p. 9.
[65] Laura Brown, 'Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma', *American Imago*, 48.1 (1991), 119–33, p. 122.

or of colour, rather than both together, which ultimately leads to marginalisation within both discourses of feminism and antiracism.[66]

I extrapolate that Arab women's intersectional identities can lead to marginalisation within the discourses of feminism, Arab literary studies and trauma studies in terms of how Arab women's trauma experiences are represented and voiced. By addressing the resulting gap, I assert that both gender and ethnic background are significant considerations in any study on voicing trauma. Therefore, my analysis of the different forms and reactions to trauma in this study indicates how traumatic stressors for Arab women are the amalgamation of catastrophic events on both the individual and collective level, as well as everyday microaggressions related to patriarchal power dynamics, sociopolitical and economic contexts and postcolonial hierarchies. This reading thus encompasses more than one dimension in the intersectional identities of Arab women and allows for a better understanding of self-representation in literature in terms of silence and trauma.

Within the field of literary criticism, the relationship between silence and trauma is often linked to the concept of 'unspeakable' or 'unspoken' traumatic events that need to be articulated. Dori Laub, for example, claims that the speakers about trauma 'prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to—and of listening to themselves', going on to outline the role of the listener, who '*must listen to and hear the silence*, speaking mutely both in silence and in speech, both from behind and from within the speech'.[67] Hearing silence includes understanding the context of that silence and differentiating between enforced silence and silence as a choice. The positioning of voices is also detrimental to understanding trauma

---

[66] Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241–99 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>, p. 1244.

[67] Dori Laub, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge 1991), p. 58 (author's emphasis).

narrative—who is speaking or choosing not to speak? To whom? Why? More specifically, within Arabic narratives of trauma, Nora Parr suggests silence can be a marker for extreme violence and events that resist expression, and so trauma is conceived as an unimaginable reality that can only be expressed through 'eloquent silence'.[68] This argument links Arab trauma narratives to both Caruth's views on the incomprehensible and unknowable nature of trauma and Ephratt's interpretations of the interactional communicative functions of silence. I extend these approaches to incorporate a more gendered application of trauma theory and eloquent silence through my analysis of the novels in this study as female polyphonic narratives of trauma in which women utilise strategic silence to communicate different meanings.

Narrowing the field even more to the intersection of studies on silence and Arab women, the predominant view focuses on either the oppressive or subversive dimensions of silence. The enforced silence of Arab women has been explored in terms of psychological, sociological, cultural and feminist factors, but the focus is usually on the necessity of breaking silence and thus challenging oppressive patriarchal social constructs and gendered power differentials. In fact, the very act of writing is considered a form of breaking silence for Arab women authors, and the representation of female silence in their texts doubly so. Faqir's *In the House of Silence* exemplifies this as it reveals the perspectives and testimonies of several Arab women writers about their own experiences of silencing. Magda Al-Nowaihi, for example, discusses silence in the context of Arab women's autobiographical works:

> [T]he authors are speaking out against their silences and against the forces and mechanisms that produced it, but they are also acknowledging its power by incorporating certain silences in their writing and reproducing their narrative voices as sites of contradiction and ambivalence.[69]

---

[68] Nora Parr, 'No More "Eloquent Silence": Narratives of Occupation, Civil War, and Intifada Write Everyday Violence and Challenge Trauma Theory', *Middle East - Topics & Arguments*, 11 (2018), 58–68 <https://doi.org/10.17192/meta.2018.11.7792>, p. 58.

[69] Magda M. Al-Nowaihi, 'Resisting Silence in Arab Women's Autobiographies', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 33.4 (2001), 477–502, p. 479.

I expand this argument to include narrative voices within Arab women's fiction, and through considering silence an implicit voice that includes both the author and her characters, I suggest that Arab women's silences communicate their trauma while also challenging dominant discourses. This leads to a subtle differentiation of the relationship between silence and trauma within this context: oppressive silencing results in trauma, but strategic silence—silence that is chosen—becomes a means for resisting and communicating trauma. From a sociological perspective, for example, choosing silence can allow women to maintain the façade of conformity and obedience when confronted by the threat of censure or punishment for challenging patriarchal social norms. In this case, silence is both reactive and proactive: it is a learned response from previous traumatic experiences, but it is also a mechanism to protect themselves from future trauma. I thereby argue that silence as a choice enacts a trauma response and can be considered the voice of trauma, allowing for the assertion of agency that is otherwise denied through enforced silence.

This study is divided into five chapters, each consisting of a close reading of one of the chosen novels. The first chapter, 'Embodying the Snake-Woman: Introspective Silence in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*', examines the relationship between silence, women's language and female embodiment in Raja Alem's novel. The story revolves around the eponymous character's search for meaning in a world governed by men, which manifests as a journey to uncover a universal language that can help her express her true self. Fatma submerges herself in a meditative silence, opening herself up to the mystical world of the snakes that feature heavily in the novel, which allows her to gain the knowledge and strength to undertake a journey of self-discovery and withstand and challenge her abusive husband. The structural and textual features of this novel play an important role in highlighting female voices, and so I consider the impact of the collaborative relationship between Alem and her editor, Tom McDonough, on the

authorial voice, as well as focusing on thematic elements such as the connection between Fatma's silence and her body. In this chapter, I also investigate how the elements of magical feminism and the Arabesque form are utilised to highlight the transformational power of female bodies and the importance of matriarchal history in the formation of identity. Gendered social conventions are subtly subverted using the supernatural—including a spirit guide figure who accompanies Fatma—and Fatma's final metamorphosis, which allows her to find her place in the universe.

In the second chapter, 'Women Behind Bars: Silence and Self-Preservation in *The Golden Chariot*', I investigate how women's traumatic experiences are voiced with the help of Salwa Bakr's 'new language', which incorporates feminine linguistic elements that challenge normative gendered binaries. Within the confines of the novel's setting, a female prison, the main character Aziza plans a journey to the heavens on a golden chariot, painstakingly choosing worthy companions to join her. The polyphony of this novel is enhanced through the use of multiple levels of narration that relay the stories of thirteen characters, depicting a wide spectrum of female trauma and suffering at the hands of an unforgiving patriarchal society. The silence of the female characters fluctuates between enforced oppressive silencing and the conscious decision to not speak. I analyse these silences and show their correlation with female insanity and testimony, in addition to the significance of the theme of confinement and the all-female community on the sharing of traumatic female experiences. Aziza's narrative, her movement through the cells of the prisons as she watches and decides on her companions, is the thread that holds all these voices together.

The amplification and transmission of female voices in Nawal El Saadawi's novel through the act of narrating or writing is explored in the third chapter, 'A Voice from Hell: Silence and Resistance in *Woman at Point Zero*'. On the eve of her execution in a prison, the main character,

Firdaus, tells a female psychiatrist her story, verbally navigating the many traumatic experiences that led to a life of prostitution and culminated in the murder of a man. The complex narrative structure complements the first-person narration of the main character, Firdaus, while also exploring power dynamics. Silence and the breaking of silence can both be seen as a means of resistance in this text, constituting a challenge to the corrupt patriarchal system that perpetuates the exploitation of women. I also consider the relationship between Firdaus's body, her sense of agency and her silence by analysing various motifs and themes such as knives, the transactional nature of relationships and the novel's striking use of visual symbolism. Through her testimony in the "safe" space of the prison, Firdaus reveals how she was conditioned to remain silent and passive and how she eventually learned to fight back, both physically and verbally.

The fourth chapter, 'Outsider, Madwoman, Exile: Narratives of Female Silence in *Pillars of Salt*', examines the significance of female counter-narratives that challenge dominant male narratives in Fadia Faqir's novel. The characters of Maha and Um Saad are confined to the same room in a mental asylum and, through a series of flashbacks and therapeutic testimony—interspersed by the narrative of an outsider, the Storyteller—different versions of Maha and Um Saad's stories and trauma are revealed. In addition to these voicing strategies, Faqir employs cultural and historical context and language to critique both the normative Arab patriarchal system and colonial Orientalist vision. This double jeopardy for women is embodied in the insidiousness of the male gaze, resulting in the objectification and demonisation of women by the Storyteller. Women who maintain their agency and challenge authority by using their voices are portrayed as monstrous and unnatural. Furthermore, the contrasting narratives reveal how female insanity is weaponised as a form of control and punishment for nonconformity. Within these contexts, silence manifests both as an undermining of female voices and as an intentional

choice to remain silent despite the scrutiny and demonisation of the male gaze—this silence averts the male gaze and allows the women to observe the world and their place in it. Finally, I consider how the asylum functions as a microcosm of the outside world while also providing a space for self-expression and female solidarity.

The impact of collective and individual experiences of trauma on female voices is explored in the fifth chapter, entitled 'Iron-Jawed Women: Hiding Behind Silence in *Mornings in Jenin*'. Susan Abulhawa's multi-generational novel depicts the effects of the Israeli occupation on the Palestinian Abulheja family. The main plot revolves around the loss of the infant Ismael Abulheja during his family's forced displacement from their village by the Israeli military, and the impact of this loss on his parents, Dalia and Hasan, his siblings and the Jewish couple who engineered his disappearance and adopted him under the name David. In this chapter, I consider how trauma impacts Dalia Abulheja, especially in terms of voicing her experiences and communicating with those around her. As a young girl, Dalia establishes a pattern of silence as a deliberate detachment and distancing of the self to avoid pain. By tracing the relationship between mother and daughter, I show how Dalia's 'iron-jawed' silence becomes an inherited coping mechanism, providing a space that both protects and isolates. I explore the different instances of trauma that Dalia and Amal experience, such as the microaggressions and catastrophes of war, and how these push the characters to hide behind silence. Significantly, Amal's final journey of return allows her to reclaim her memories and sense of self while also teaching her the importance of unclenching her jaw to speak her truth to her own daughter, thus breaking generational silences.

Through these close readings of the novels, I illustrate how Arab women's writing depicts silence and how it can constitute the voice of female trauma. By considering these texts trauma narratives, I point to the functionality of silence as an implicit speech act with different effects,

such as introspection, self-preservation, resistance, observation and detachment, that often overlap. The authors portray the socially prescribed gender roles, power differentials and cultural expectations that influence Arab women through utilising the polyphonic nature of novelistic discourse and a variety of narrative structures and strategies. The trope of the female storyteller is one that is embodied in the very act of writing these novels: the authors, storytellers themselves, write different representations of female storytellers who use their voices in interesting ways to ensure that their stories are heard above the din of other—often conflicting—versions and that these stories remain.

Chapter One

Embodying the Snake-Woman: Introspective Silence in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*

Fatma: A Novel of Arabia by Raja Alem is a tale about bodies and dreams, power and prophecy and a quest for identity and the meaning of life. In this novel, magic and reality intertwine until neither reader nor character can distinguish the two, in an eerie and yet very tangible story of a woman's quest for self in the face of abuse and trauma. An integral part of this novel is the main character's use of silence as a means of introspection: not speaking is a choice she makes as she tries to make sense of the world, and this meditative (almost therapeutic) silence helps her discover the 'language' that makes up the essence of the universe, eventually leading her to understand and accept herself.

In this chapter, I will explore the transformative nature of women's voices and bodies as envisaged in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*. This novel is unique in that it is originally written in English by a female Arab author with the help of a male American collaborator, and so I will consider how this impacts the portrayal of women's experiences by linking this to the context of feminist dialogism. As one of the main themes of the text is the search for a universal language through which the self can be properly formulated, I will also examine how female "body" language manifests in the novel. The textual elements of magical feminism as delineated by Wendy Faris coupled with narrative techniques, such as the Arabesque and nested stories, help construct a disorienting world in which a snake farm provides the means for the main character, Fatma, to explore her own voice and place in the world. Fatma's introspective silence functions both as a subversive strategy to challenge gender norms and as a tool for self-

discovery. Furthermore, by exploring the power dynamics between Fatma, on the one hand, and her father and husband on the other, I will illustrate the transformative nature of Fatma's silence, especially in terms of the motifs that point to female sexuality, matriarchal history and embodiment.

This novel revolves around the eponymous main character, Fatma, who is a lonely young Saudi girl, living in solitude and silence with a widowed father. She is suddenly married off at sixteen to a young man she has never met before, but despite her hopes, her husband, Sajir, is sexually and physically abusive from their very first night together. Sajir seems emotionally unavailable and only speaks to Fatma to command, berate or belittle her. He forbids her to enter a certain room in the house, all the while expecting her full submission to his authority: 'he was more determined than ever to treat her as his slave'.[1] However, despite Fatma's silent obedience, her curiosity, 'an unruly demon', leads her to enter her husband's 'forbidden' room within days of her marriage (p. 16). This room houses a snake farm, wherein rare and exotic snakes are bred so that their venom can be harvested and sold. Fascinated by these creatures, Fatma is later bitten by an escaped venomous snake. She hovers on the brink of death for weeks but awakens after undergoing an eerie transformation into a sensual, animalistic 'nymph', no longer a girl, but a stunning, seductive and dangerous snake-woman.

After this awakening, Fatma takes over the care of the snakes from Sajir and sinks further into silence as she begins a spiritual journey to uncover her genuine self and the truth about the

---

[1] Raja Alem, *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*, ed. by Tom McDonough (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p.130. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

universe as revealed through the snakes. As a married woman, Fatma lives an isolated and lonely existence; her husband both fears and hates her, which fuels his anger and abuse. She spends her days and nights caring for the snakes, fulfilling her wifely duties and inscribing her thoughts, memories and experiences by embroidering on the silken folds of an abaya handed down to her by her grandmother, Shumla. A spirit guide manifests itself to her, with whom she starts to have conversations, allowing her space to speak her doubts and fears, and, in turn, the spirit tells her fantastical stories that tie into her matriarchal history. The spirit, Noor, also "reads" to her from different magical books, teaching her more about herself, prophesying about her future and unlocking some of the secrets of her dreams of life and death.

Over the years, as Fatma perfects her guardianship of the snakes, myths, visions and dreams continue to play a large role in her journey to self-discovery. This is accompanied by physical transformations, as she manifests animalistic qualities, and tattoo-like signs appear all over her body with each spiritual milestone reached. Eventually, Fatma—disguised as a boy—accompanies Sajir on a tour to the deserts of Najran to show off the snakes and their abilities. Most notably on this odyssey, Fatma has a series of epiphanic moments. She experiences true passion for the first time in her life and, through feverish dreams and prophetic visions, comes to better understand herself. She is pursued by a virile warrior prince who sees through her disguise and tries to tempt her into a physical relationship, but she resists, and all too soon, Fatma and her husband return home.

Throughout this, Sajir maintains his emotional distance and the two never really share any real intimacy, despite his continued obsession with Fatma's body. He is eventually driven to a fanatical madness, and he continually tries to break her, using verbal abuse and marital rape as his tools. However, after twenty years of marriage, Fatma's body finally rebels against Sajir

and, in response, he throws Fatma out into the street, with nothing but her embroidered abaya to show for all their years together. She sheds the abaya and wanders about naked, ruminating on her life and the trauma she has endured at the hands of Sajir. Fatma realises she is dying and is living her final moments of self-actualisation; in her first true act of conscious rebellion, she returns to her home and dies in front of Sajir. This happens as a glorious final transformation into a magnificent serpent, her 'genuine self', which then dissolves and flows into a river of water and light, ushered and guided by her spirit guide to join the everlasting River of Life.

One of the main themes of *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* is the spiritual search for one's true self, manifested in the need to decipher and understand a universal language that can communicate that truth. The first signs of this are linked to the changes that Fatma notices when she takes over the care of the snakes which, incidentally, marks the start of her journey of self-discovery. Fatma notices that 'the ceiling over her head cleared', opening her mind to the 'Invisible World' around her (p. 27). This world reveals itself as a network of rivers with letters and numbers written on the waves, 'signifying things unknown to human beings' (p. 27). These signs and symbols continue to appear to Fatma in her waking hours and her dreams, and she endeavours to decipher them and bring them under control. This act of decoding thus becomes an important way for her to achieve control and power. During this period, Fatma chooses silence, perhaps because she feels unable to properly articulate her thoughts and feelings, but she anticipates that once she unlocks this language, she will be able to express herself and communicate her true self to others. This relationship between silence, language and (female) power is multifaceted and is grounded both in the dialogism of the novel and its form and structures. Fatma's introspective silence belies the intricate spiritual journey she undertakes to

better understand herself. The novel traces this journey through portraying multiple levels of narration that privilege female bodies and voices while also enhancing the magical realism of the text.

The novel is centred around the concept of women's language, self-realisation and power, which can be seen to align with various feminist/gynocritical works. For example, the conceptualisation of a feminine language in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* can be seen to build on the concepts of *l'écriture féminine* and *parler-femme* as posited by Cixous and Irigaray as it centres on the female body and women's voices. This is first alluded to when, as a seventeen-year-old bride, Fatma believes that, as soon as she is touched by a man, 'the animal part of her would spring to life and her inner self would be revealed' (p. 13). This is partly why she accepts her marriage to an unseen, unknown man. Based on traditional Arab and Islamic social constructs, marriage provides the sanctioned means for physical and sexual contact, and so she believes marrying Sajir will be the means to reveal or unleash this self. However, her husband's sexual and physical violence towards her on their wedding night disabuses her of this belief:

> He plunged brutally into her, battering the gate of her soul, breaking it open […] and wrecking the path that led to the face she wanted to show him, her true, hidden face. So the rules were set, Sajir would go on forcing himself on his bride, breaking her, burying her wild flowers under scars and heaps of rage (p. 14).

By destroying Fatma's hopes of self-expression and sexual exploration, Sajir asserts his patriarchal dominance in the most brutal way, pushing her to find other ways to 'dislocate' her inner self. She does this by turning to her inner world, becoming interested only in her dreams, and, after awakening from her transformative snakebite, she also immerses herself in the world of the snakes. This is important because she envisages that the snakes' movement invokes 'the music of the universe […] the realm where flesh and spirit were one' (p. 36), and the patterns on their skin are 'ambiguous, cipherlike letters [that] contained the creative essence, the source

of the universe' (p. 37). Her observation of the snakes thus equips her with the tools to locate and decode these and other signs that form the building blocks of a universal language that is also inherently tied to Fatma and her body.

Fatma is later able to utilise this language-based knowledge to reclaim her body and sexuality when she travels to the deserts of Najran. She first undergoes an awakening when she is physically confronted by Taray, a mighty warrior prince who is portrayed as also connected to language through his improvisation of poetry. During their first encounter, he physically assaults her when she goes for a walk alone—he jumps on her and caresses her body, claiming: 'This body belongs to no man' (p. 82). He urges her to touch herself, but leaves when Fatma resists, telling her: 'I could rip your clothes off right now […] and see you as you really are. But I hold you in respect […] You have to come to me of your own free will […] tear off your clothes and show me what a woman you are' (p. 82). Taray's brutal and unbidden touches and his attempts to manipulate her through claims of respect for Fatma are problematic at best. However, on another level, there is the implication that the divide between Fatma's physical body and her "real" self can be broached through her own choices. This encounter is jarring for Fatma yet not for the obvious reasons:

> It was not the man, Taray, who brought Fatma's dead embers to life. It was Fatma's own body, her own touching of it. Her touch ignited the need to be touched […] It was not sexual contact she was thinking of, it was human intimacy […] The language was physical, but she had yet to utter a word of it. She wanted her body to stutter on its alphabet, its storming instincts (pp. 82-83).

The emphasis on how Fatma's sexual awakening is not precipitated by a man is almost as important as Fatma's conceptualisation of "body" language. Although Taray's touches can be considered sexual or physical assault, his words cause Fatma to ponder her motivation for self-exploration. This encounter, after years of abuse by a husband who does not appreciate the beauty, power and autonomy of her body, thus forces Fatma to re-examine her physical and

sexual needs. Her desire for non-sexual intimacy can be traced back to her formative years before marrying Sajir and it is the driving force for her search for a means to express herself and be known to others.

Fatma's subsequent encounters with Taray are characterised by the language of physical intimacy, a language that allows her to be seen. These illicit and dreamlike encounters allow Fatma to realise the power of her body and her inner self:

> She knew now that she had a body […] She had substance—she wanted everyone to see that. She wanted eyes to look inside her […] she had lips too. Yes, most of all, she had lips—masked lips, but lips all the same. And a birthmark […] a sign of her naked, natural self! (p. 94).

Fatma's masked lips seem to symbolise her silence and inability to properly express herself, the remedy to which is soon uncovered when Fatma undergoes a spiritual experience in the desert. Trekking through the sand, strange letters appear to her that seem to show time in reverse and affect Fatma: 'She became a tunnel through which the energy of the universe flowed […] The energy, the light, and the music was a language. The language comprised the keys to the universe and Fatma was that language' (p. 96). Fatma's embodiment of language will eventually allow her to properly understand the universe and despite the perceived universality of this language, it can be seen as a form of Irigaray's 'woman-speak' in the sense that it is an alternate form of discourse that is deciphered through Fatma's inner (female) intuition, and it is a language of the body, first and foremost. It is also a language that Fatma is—in this case, quite literally—able to 'get inside of', in the words of Cixous. Fatma's body is thus extremely important in locating and using this language. It is, in a sense, an extension of her voice, and the mystical signs that later start to appear on her body are physical manifestations of her progression towards finally finding and expressing her true identity.

The interplay of female self, body and language in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* is also developed further by the dialogic/polyphonic nature of this novel. Hugo Letiche states: 'Polyphony consists of the coexistence of many voices, identities, and perspectives', going on to argue that, '[m]ulti-voiced polyphony demands that various voices or perspectives have agency.[2] This kind of multiplicity of voices can be found in this novel, with its implicit and explicit voices, the silent and the spoken, and the themes of silence, language and voice are explored on more than one level as the novel interweaves the voices of the author/collaborator, narrator and various characters. *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* is a novel of and about multiple voices, especially in its preoccupation with language and a woman's search for a means of communication and self-expression for, as Laila Al-Sharqi states, '*Fatma* problematizes the relationship between woman and language'.[3] With this emphasis on female agency and language, this text can be further analysed through considerations of feminist dialogism, especially in terms of the complexity and, potentially, 'disagreeing discourse' that arises from the authorship and editing/translation process.

Raja Alem is a female Saudi writer whose first language is Arabic, and this is her first novel written in English. Although it is her second language, she chose to write in English in an attempt to write more straightforwardly and to reach another world accessible to readers of English as well as Arabic.[4] She also considers writing (or, 'coming out') in English as a way to shed inhibitions, perhaps as it allows her to distance herself from her writing in a way that Arabic, as her native tongue, does not. In addition to this distance and freedom, Alem states

---

[2] Hugo Letiche, 'Polyphony and Its Other', *Organization Studies*, 31.3 (2010), 261–77 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609357386>, p. 262.
[3] Al-Sharqi, (2016), p. 67.
[4] Tom McDonough, 'Raja Alem by Tom McDonough', *BOMB Magazine*, 1 April 2008 <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/raja-alem/> [accessed 11 January 2022].

that, during the writing process, she is consciously aware that she sometimes is unable to bring her Arabic style into her English writing as it would interfere with the narrative flow.[5] This indicates a kind of doubling of authorial voice, in that the "original" voice of the writer is reworked to fit the mould or structures of the target language. Sarnou points to this doubling in anglophone Arab literature as polyphonic and dialogic elements that reflect the author's double voice.[6] This echoes Irigaray's concept of the 'double syntax' that is constructed through difference; here, it is not only sexual difference, but also cultural and linguistic difference.

This doubling is, in a manner of speaking, amplified as Alem's voice is also tempered by that of her collaborator or co-author, Tom McDonough. Rather than taking on the straightforward role of a translator, McDonough's role was more editorial, through rewriting and 'tweaking Alem's English text to improve its cadence and flow'.[7] As a male American author and cinematographer, McDonough is quite the contrast to Alem, providing interesting dichotomies in their collaboration—female and male, writer and cinematographer, Middle Eastern and Western—while at the same time raising questions of authenticity in terms of female voices and how they are interpreted or "revoiced" by men. In the 'Afterword' to *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*, McDonough describes Alem's manuscript the first time he read it as 'dense, mesmerizing, and syntactically mangled'.[8] As part of his editing process, he claims to 'paraphrase' her writing despite his ignorance of the Arabic language and its narrative strategies: 'Deliciously overwhelmed, I groped along, leaving nothing out, improvising where it felt right,

---

[5] McDonough, 2008.
[6] Sarnou, 2016, p. 210.
[7] James Cowan, 'She's Always Free to Dream: Saudi Arabian Writer Raja Alem Mixes Islam, Paganism and Magic in Her Work', *National Post*, 30 October 2002, Toronto edition <https://www.proquest.com/docview/329968095/abstract/4ACC645CA9334D0BPQ/1> [accessed 14 October 2021].
[8] Tom McDonough, 'Afterword', in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*, by Raja Alem, ed. by Tom McDonough (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 155.

swapping faxes with Raja [...] and doing my best to convey her blend of delicacy, high seriousness, and sensuous density'.[9] He also states Alem's vision is 'dis-Orienting' and her art 'methodically lunatic and insistently lyrical', all of which mark her as a preeminent voice of her time and place.[10]

It thus seems difficult to distinguish where Alem's voice stops and where McDonough's begins. It is her vision and her art that is depicted in the novel, but to what extent does McDonough's influence and artistic/linguistic license change that? McDonough ends his 'Afterword' with a self-deprecating yet adamant declaration that, taken at face value, could be construed as an answer to this question:

> In the early days of our collaboration, I flattered myself that I was going to rescue Raja—in retrospect a genuinely flabbergasting assumption, rather like flattering myself that I could speak for her. She doesn't need rescuing, and I don't speak for her. I am privileged to speak *with* her.[11]

While intentionality does play a role in the implications of the collaborative relationship between the two, it is also important to consider the issue from the viewpoint of the author herself. Alem's focus is on communication and not mere translation, and Alem is cognizant of how their collaboration has brought about a mutual immersion in each other's worlds, as Alem tells him:

> Translating my worlds with you feels like living together, each of us throwing ourselves into the other's world. Translation is an out-of-body experience. I feel like I'm watching the Raja of my childhood, along with all the aunts and grandfathers who aren't here anymore, resurrected now in another world, speaking another language, a simpler, more direct tongue.[12]

---

[9] McDonough, 2002, p. 157.
[10] McDonough, 2002, p. 158, p. 159. This is an interesting choice of words and seem to compound McDonough's (positive) opinion of the uniqueness of Alem's art as, in the same sentence, he links her to literary giants of the past: 'there's nothing close to Raja nowadays. You'd have to go back to Christopher Marlowe, or all the way to Ovid, to find anything so methodically lunatic and insistently lyrical' (2002, p. 159). This seems to detract from the expectation of solely female hysteria and madness, which itself seems an ambiguous form of praise.
[11] McDonough, 2002, p. 164 (author's emphasis).
[12] McDonough, 2008.

The fact that this novel overtly challenges cultural and gender stereotypes, coupled with this metaphorical view of resurrecting the voices of Alem's past ultimately enhances the polyphony of this novel while also ensuring her authorial voice is not subsumed.

The strategy of subverting language can be seen in many instances in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*. In addition to the aspects of female writing and language, it is important to consider how the novel's form, structure and textual elements come together to provide a space in which female bodies and voices can be seen and heard. The genre, context, literary devices and structure of the novel all contribute to building a world in which feminist dialogism, silence and embodiment are key and indicate a kind of experimentation that lends emphasis to the polyphonic nature of the text. This novel depicts female silence but that does not mean it is devoid of voice. These voices are filtered in the novel owing to the use of a third-person omniscient narrator that conveys Fatma's silences and thoughts, her husband's violence and obsession, the eccentricities of the snakes and Fatma's spiritual journeys through dreamscapes.

The reader hears the spoken voices of the characters, most notably Fatma, Noor and Sajir, and, overall, there is a strong element of storytelling and nested or circular narratives. For example, a neighbour knocks on Fatma's door one day and, once admitted into the house, raves to Fatma about hellish black 'lady crows' that plague her dreams, then tells her all the minute details of her nightmares, invoking 'nightmare-women' that seem to sweep around the room (p. 39). Despite Fatma's silence, the neighbour goes on to tell her about Sajir's first wife, who allegedly burned to death in the kitchen. She weaves a fanciful tale about one of Sajir's snakes as the culprit—a genii-serpent that fell in love with him and, because of its jealousy, haunted his first wife and chased her with fire until she eventually met her untimely demise. Fatma listens to all this in aloof silence. This neighbour never appears again and when Fatma asks

Sajir about her, he claims that Fatma has imagined the woman as there are no other residents in the building, citing this as an example of Fatma's madness. This incident is significant for a number of reasons. In addition to inserting another layer of female storytelling, it provides an intriguing backstory about Fatma's mysterious husband. The eccentricity and questionable existence of the character coupled with the occult-like overtones of her story result in a Gothic nightmarish interlude that also reveals Sajir's psychological manipulation of Fatma.

In a metaphorical sense, the novel is an ouroboros snake of sorts, with its use of Arabesques and nested stories, both of which invoke the storytelling heritage of Shahrazad and *The Thousand and One Nights*. *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* opens with the ending—Sajir kicking Fatma out of the house—and then moves back in time to the "beginning" with Fatma as a young girl, until it eventually catches up with the ending and moves on to the details of Fatma's death. Like the self-devouring snake of mythology, this seems to signify a never-ending cycle of life and death, as the plot moves seamlessly from past to present and from reality to fantasy, and back again. This form of circular narration, known as the Arabesque, parallels nonlinear women's time, which can be seen as cyclical due to its ties with female biological cycles such as menstruation and gestation. In her article 'Women's Time', Julia Kristeva indicates that 'female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity'.[13] *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* follows this looping pattern, adding another dimension by also incorporating nested stories, characteristic of Bakhtin's concept of the 'stylistic uniqueness' of the novel.[14] Seymour-Jorn describes the format of the Arabesque: 'This style, found in *The Thousand and One Nights* and in many popular tales in the Arabic tradition,

[13] Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', trans. by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs*, 7.1 (1981), 13–35, p. 16.
[14] Bakhtin, 1981, p. 262.

is a style of narration in which one story leads into the next, resulting in a narrative that seems to have no clear beginning, center or end'.[15] The use of nested stories embeds multiple levels of meaning in this novel, with multiple voices, which also serves to emphasise the polyphonic nature of the novel.

Working within the paradigm of Shahrazad's tales, Faris discusses the autogenerative nature of fiction, pointing to the structural use of 'stories that grow out of other stories'.[16] Embedded stories expand the horizons of a fictional text by generating additional voices, imagery and storylines, enabling the writer—and, by extension, the characters—to 'duplicate themselves in miraculous feats of doubling; in the metaphorical register with images that take on lives of their own and engender others beyond themselves, independent of their referential worlds'.[17] The most striking examples of embedded tales in the novel are those of Fatma's grandmother, Shumla, which reveal Fatma's matriarchal history in more detail, with its ties to the supernatural and the spirit world. Rather than the strong yet ageing woman Fatma knew as a child, the tales reveal an unforgettable, powerful and sensual enchantress who tempts men and demons alike.

One of the more memorable stories that Noor relays to Fatma is about Shumla's disappearance and sudden reappearance years later. He states: 'Three years she'd been gone, and still the stories about her rang through the warriors' campfire nights […] Shumla was unforgettable' (p. 43). The fact that Shumla is always mentioned in relation to stories is

---

[15] Caroline Seymour-Jorn, 'A New Language: Salwa Bakr on Depicting Egyptian Women's Worlds', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 11.2 (2002), 151–76 <https://doi.org/10.1080/106699202200007808>, p. 167.
[16] Wendy B. Faris, 'Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction', in *Magical Realism*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 163–90 <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822397212-010>, p. 164.
[17] Faris, 1995, p. 164.

significant, especially since Shumla herself, 'never passed up an opportunity to talk about her adventures. And she told some very strange stories' (p. 43). In this case, she claims that she had been kidnapped by Satan himself and held captive, a sex slave of sorts, until she eventually set herself free by battling her kidnapper, but not before bearing him a child, 'a mighty spirit, born of Satan's indomitable passion and Shumla's indomitable inner strength' (p. 44). Interestingly, Noor tells Fatma that this story was immortalised in drawings on the rock faces of mountains: 'The pictures were said to have been drawn by agents of Satan' (p. 43). The transmission of stories here is convoluted and multi-faceted, including as it does these different narrators and audiences, as well as both oral and written narrative forms. Such examples of embedded tales both reinforce the Arabesque format, in addition to ensuring that Fatma sees Shumla as a person in her own right. Not only do others narrate her story, but Shumla's own voice rings out with the (re)telling of her stories, helping her granddaughter realise that same power in herself.

The novel's Arabesques and embedded stories are connected to another aspect that make this story stand out: its use of magical realism. On the surface, *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* is the fantastical story of a girl who tames and befriends her husband's snakes while slowly transforming into one herself. It is a tale of mystical dreamscapes and spiritual and physical journeys, filled with spirits and demons in different animalistic and human forms. The reader accompanies Fatma, this gorgeous yet poisonous snake-woman, on a tumultuous quest of introspection and self-discovery as she learns how to escape her cage and, in the process, drives her husband mad. However, on a deeper level, this novel provides a critique of Saudi/Arab patriarchal society, challenging normative gender roles and placing emphasis on female voices and female identity. In their introduction to *Magical Realism and Literature*, Warnes and Sasser consider the history and context of magical realism as a genre, starting with a narrow definition

of the term from a literary criticism standpoint as 'a mode or a style—sometimes a genre— of writing in which magical elements are presented alongside realistic ones as if there were no difference of kind between them'.[18] Using this as a starting point for classifying *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* as a magical realist text, we can consider Faris' more detailed list of the characteristics of magical realist fiction.

In 'The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism', Faris delineates five main characteristics that can be summarised as follows: the text contains 'irreducible elements' of magic; descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; two contradictory understandings of events may arise, leading the reader to experience some 'unsettling doubts'; there is a near-merging of two worlds; and 'these fictions question received ideas about time, space, and identity'.[19] These elements appear in the novel as it weaves together both the magical and mundane, at times making it difficult to distinguish between the two while also managing to develop the main themes of female identity and transformative silence. Contradictory understandings and unsettling doubts are most in evidence when Fatma and Sajir travel to the deserts of Najran to show off the snakes and their abilities. Despite being disguised as a boy, Fatma is recognised and befriended by a poet who claims to have been in love with Shumla, and she has several sexually-fraught encounters with Taray. Most notably, these experiences with both the poet and the prince blur the line between reality and fantasy. The poet pays homage to her as the prophesied descendant of Shumla and Satan's child, after which he leaves Fatma 'uncertain whether he had actually knocked on the door of her cage or

---

[18] Christopher Warnes and Kim Anderson Sasser, 'Introduction', in *Magical Realism and Literature*, ed. by Christopher Warnes and Kim Anderson Sasser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 1–10 <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108551601.001>, p. 1.

[19] Wendy B. Faris, 'The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism', *Janus Head*, Magical Realism, 5.2 (2002), pp. 169-73.

whether he was just a figment of her imagination' (p. 88). He later takes her to sacred ruins in the desert that precipitate Fatma's understanding of the language of the universe. On the other hand, Fatma dreams about an encounter with the prince in which he cuts a braid of her hair and ties it around his waist. She spots this same belt when she next sees him and feels the shorn bristles of her hair, giving rise to the question of whether it was indeed a dream or whether the encounter truly took place.

Magical realist texts 'reconfigure structures of autonomy and agency, moves that destabilize established structures of power and control'.[20] This enables the genre to function as feminist discourse, as is evident in this novel with its emphasis on female bodies and the role of women in a patriarchal society. Fatma is always at the mercy of the patriarchs of her family: first her father, then her husband. However, the elements of magical realism function here to undermine these power politics by envisaging an alternate supernatural space in which Fatma asserts her own power. In her article, Faris discusses the history of magical realism as a strategy for 'literary decolonisation', a concept that Ricci-Jane Adams builds on, claiming: 'Magical realism can be employed […] to achieve decolonisation of the female subject'.[21] She also defines magical feminism as a hybrid of magical realism and feminism, and states:

> Magical feminism […] operates as a language within a larger form that is feminism […] The magic or supernatural acts as tool [*sic*] of defamiliarisation, foregrounding those cultural 'norms' that are so deeply embedded that we are no longer aware of them, but that continue to perpetuate the marginalisation of women.[22]

Such female decolonisation and hybridity and this concept of a language can be seen here in the way the elements of magical realism function as a feminist critique in this portrayal of a

---

[20] Faris, 2002, p. 111.
[21] Ricci-Jane Adams, 'Magical Feminism: The Paradoxical Pain in *Fefu and Her Friends* by Maria Irene Fornes and *The Eisteddfod* by Lally Katz'*, Double Dialogues*, 6, 2005.
[22] Adams, 2005.

woman who, despite various forms of abuse and discrimination, grows into herself, breaking free from the cage of societal expectations and subverting gender roles through effecting a powerful female transformation.[23]

An important part of Fatma's silence and journey to self-actualisation is her spirit guide, Noor. This figure, in the shape of a snake with a lion's head, is derived from an image of 'an exquisite figure holding a flag in one hand and a lion's tail in another' (p. 12). This flag-bearer was engraved on an urn from her childhood home, the name revealing itself to Fatma as a three-year-old. She leaves this behind when she marries, but after Sajir first shouts at Fatma and accuses her of trying to poison him, she sits in the shadows of the snake farm and stares until the figure of Noor manifests.[24] The timing of his appearance, his characteristics and the "lessons" he teaches her are all extremely important as this figure can be interpreted in two ways: as a figment of Fatma's imagination, or as a supernatural entity that actually appears to her. This narrative indeterminacy reflects the dichotomy of magical realism/feminism, with these two (seemingly) contradictory understandings of events, resulting in 'unsettling doubts', in addition to the near-merging of two worlds, the real/psychological and the magical/spiritual. This allows for both interpretations to be valid.[25]

---

[23] Magical feminism in Arab fiction can also be contrasted with what Roxanne Douglas refers to as the Arab feminist Gothic approach. See: Roxanne Douglas, 'Situating Arab Women's Writing in a Feminist "Global Gothic": Madness, Mothers and Ghosts', *Feminist Theory*, 24.3 (2021), 1–19 <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211019188>. Douglas argues that this approach, 'utilises and transforms western Gothic expressions of excess and ambivalence to explore feminist struggles against erasure in the Arabic-speaking world' (p. 3). One of the striking aspects of this approach, she claims, is its, 'attempt to recover women's knowledge and narratives' (p. 4). Such an approach certainly applies to *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*, especially considering the undeniable link between supernatural elements and the search for meaning/language.

[24] Ironically, "Noor" means "light" in Arabic; this figure appears as a shadow and is associated with darkness, yet it also guides Fatma towards the truth—or, the "light".

[25] See: Tzvetan Todorov*, The Fantastic : A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975). He defines the fantastic as the, 'hesitation experienced by that person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event', summing up the dilemma presented by the supernatural: 'to believe or not to believe?' (p. 25, p. 83). This interpretative doubt is held in balance in texts that feature the supernatural, which, in turn, can be radically destabilising as both the character

Noor, whether a projected/imagined entity or a "real" supernatural spirit, is characterised by Fatma's own strength of spirit and her silence. The spirit guide first appears as a 'fragile' silent shadow that grows stronger and soon becomes a constant companion that 'monitored her [Fatma's] daily routine and spoke with her regularly about her worries and fears' (p. 30). This initial fragility reflects Fatma's state of mind when the spirit first manifests: she is, in a sense, broken by the realisation that her husband is abusive and cannot be the person with whom she can share her true self. Fatma takes refuge in silence yet craves intimacy, and the appearance of Noor breaks the silence of the marital home and provides an intimate space that is otherwise missing.

Interestingly, Noor is not positioned as the male equivalent of or counterpart to Fatma's mystical femininity. Although Noor is always described as male and masculine pronouns are used to refer to him, he always dodges questions about his identity or nature. 'What difference does it make?' (p. 31) he replies when Fatma asks him whether he is a man or woman, seeming to advocate gender fluidity of sorts: 'You assume there is a barrier between the sexes. There is no barrier. You will become all sexes' (p. 32). Even his name, Noor, is gender-neutral in Arabic and can be used for either sex. This begs the question of why is Noor a "he" then? It could be simply because the original flag-bearer figure on Fatma's urn was male, and Noor is merely transposed from this engraving. In all other aspects, Noor is deliberately positioned as a non-sexed entity, which moves the relationship away from a surrogate marriage and more into the realm of a purely platonic mentor-mentee role. Noor is not a stand-in husband figure but seems more closely associated with the spirit and the self; Fatma can speak candidly to Noor about

---

and the reader are caught between two solutions: 'one probable and supernatural, the other improbable and rational' (p. 49).

anything, even intimate matters such as her sexual relationship with Sajir. A parallel could be drawn between Noor and Tiresias in that he is sexually fluid and prophetic. Trish Salah explores how Tiresian psychoanalysis 'indexes a feminine other beyond the feminine construed through and contained by the symbolic cut of sexual difference'.[26] Notably, Noor's prophecies all envisage alternate forms of femininity such as when he predicts Fatma's end: 'You must remember that the snake's art of shedding one's skin every year runs in your blood. When the time comes, your body will be so supple you won't believe how easily it slips away' (p. 56).

Noor's androgyny is important to the relationship as it means he can encourage Fatma to explore her feminine power and sexuality without his own sexuality becoming a barrier or hindering Fatma in any way. She does not feel shame or shyness in his presence because, as neither male nor female, he does not judge her, but urges her to use all means at her disposal to achieve that state of understanding that will allow her insight into the Invisible World. Al-Sharqi argues that, Noor, as a non-sexed entity, 'does not subscribe to the patriarchal values of Fatma's society', and this can be seen in how he emphasises Fatma's power as a queen or goddess in her own right, building her confidence in herself and guiding her on the path to self-realisation.[27] Fatma's conversations with Noor play an important role in how her voice is presented. Essentially, without this character, Fatma's voice would not be heard as she only really speaks to him. The two discuss the import of the narratives he reveals to her, so Fatma takes part in the process of give and take, of storytelling and story-receiving. In this sense, the perceived dichotomy of Fatma's silence and her participation in the storytelling process can be

---

[26] Trish Salah, 'What Does Tiresias Want?', *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 4.3–4 (2017), 632–38 <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-4190001>, p. 633.
[27] Al-Sharqi, 2016, p. 61.

viewed as a way in which to escape the oppressive patriarchal order represented by her husband and her father.

Another important characteristic of Noor is his relationship to silence and language. Fatma and Noor appear to communicate through speaking, but then Fatma questions this during their first interactions: 'What language are you speaking? […] what language am I speaking?' Fatma asks Noor (pp. 30-31). His answer is almost annoyingly metaphysical:

> I hear sounds directly from the great river that every utterance aspires to. There, in the great river, all languages lose their differences and shed their ambiguities; in the great river, all of them speak with the same flowing melody […] I can't understand words except in this absolute sense (p. 31).

This is significant because it points to the power of language as a unifying force and seems to embody the concept of feminist dialogism. This is the self-same language that Fatma is attempting to decipher through immersing herself in the world of the snakes, the same language that she believes will allow her to express her true self. Fatma's feminine language and Noor's more absolute sense of language is later alluded to when Fatma speaks to Taray in Najran—he tells her:

> [T]his is the first time I've heard you say a single word. But you're not really saying words, you're doing something else—chirping, or something not human. I couldn't understand what you just said, not the actual words, if I thought I was listening to human language. But the sounds you just made are the sounds I *should* be hearing from you (p. 92).

His perception of Fatma as otherworldly does not seem to affect his ability to understand her although this indicates the interplay of some of the elements of magical feminism: the unsettling doubts and the near-merging of two worlds. In this case, Taray posits Fatma's speech as inhuman, yet his ability to understand it seems to contradict this assumption. This incident can be traced back to how Fatma repeatedly asks for reaffirmation from Noor when they first start their conversations—for example, when she asks him: 'Do I sound like you? […] I've never

really had the chance to know how I sound. Especially since I got married and stopped talking' (p. 31). Fatma starts to hear her own voice and experiments with it by actually participating in conversations with Noor rather than being a silenced passive listener as she is with her father and Sajir.

Fatma's silence influences more than one aspect of her life. It can be considered subversive, playing a role both in her search for self-actualisation and in her relationships with the men in her life. Fatma is not always completely silent: she does, indeed, speak, but this speech is limited, especially with the male authority figures around her and this reflects her attitude towards them. This silence plays a major role in the novel's depiction of gender roles and power politics.

The novel employs the strategies of feminist dialogism and magical feminism to defamiliarise and subvert gender norms, which, in turn, destabilises the power structures and hierarchies depicted in the novel. Fatma's patterns of silence towards the two main men in her life challenge, in a way, the gender norms of her society by subtly redefining the parameters of father/daughter or husband/wife relationships. She finds a room of her own through subverting the forbidden room of the snake farm. This space is important because '[s]he never felt alone when she entered [it], never exiled or excluded' (pp. 18-19) and because it facilitates Fatma's introspective silence. This allows her to form a deeper understanding of the world, which helps her better understand Sajir as well as herself. For example, as part of her spiritual journey, she starts to see things that are ordinarily hidden to humans, the 'invisible rivers of life' (p. 27). This ability allows her to see the real Sajir: 'his heart and soul opened before her like a book. The vision was so nakedly clear that she had to look away to leave him some privacy' (p. 27).

Within the space of her silence, she is no longer the oppressed daughter or wife, but a thinker, a philosopher, a dreamer and a wise-woman: 'she saw herself clearly for the first time in her life, saw her beauty and individuality. She was able to see herself as a separate being, with the ability to stand back and take a good look at what she was' (p. 136). Silence, in a way, becomes part of this rite of passage, as she delves into the phantasmagorical, philosophical world that lies beyond the snakes and their cages, leaving behind the trauma she endures at the hands of her father and husband and becoming her own person, an individual who can think for herself.

This novel is set in modern Saudi Arabia and was written in 2002, when Saudi women still did not have the same freedoms enjoyed by their contemporaries in other parts of the world including other Arab countries. Saudi culture places great emphasis on patriarchal hierarchy as it is a culture that 'retains aspects of tribalism […] which restrict women's choices and place them under the authority of an overarching male guardian'.[28] It is evident that Fatma's life is influenced by this concept of guardianship, taking into consideration the laws that restricted and governed Saudi women's rights at the time when the novel was first written. Although some of these have since changed, *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* is set when there were laws that, for example, prevented Saudi women from driving, enforced segregation in education and the workforce and kept them under the authority of their male relatives, who controlled their 'mobility, marriage, work, and education'.[29] Furthermore, the following hierarchy applies to Arab—and, by extension, Saudi—families:

> [T]he father's supreme position as *rabb al-usra* ("lord of the family" or *pater familias*) contrasts with the subordinate status of his wife and children, who are socially and

[28] Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 18.
[29] Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 15.

> economically dependent on him. They are expected to submit to his rule, obey his wishes, and treat him with deference.[30]

Thus, the societal and cultural expectation for women in this context is that they will remain in the family home under the guardianship of the father until they marry, after which guardianship passes to the husband when the wife moves into his home. This novel depicts an example of this overarching patriarchal hierarchy with two main figures of male authority, Fatma's father, Mansoor, and her husband, Sajir. Fatma is, in a sense, buried alive in both her father's and her matrimonial homes: she hardly has any contact with the outside world, and all her time is dedicated to the household.

The characters of Mansoor and Sajir are both placed in positions of dominance, and, as per societal and cultural norms, obedience is expected from Fatma as the sole female family member, being first a daughter and then a wife. This contributes to the psychological makeup of her character and her seeming lack of self-determination. Fatma rarely leaves the house after she marries, and in the three instances that she does, it is always in the company of a man. The first two excursions are for her father's funeral and then when the snake farm goes on tour, and she is accompanied in these instances by her husband.[31] The third, and final, case of Fatma leaving the house is when Sajir throws her out and the male building porter follows her and tries to protect her out of a sense of compassion and empathy for her fragile state of mind as she wanders naked in the street.

---

[30] Dalya Abudi, *Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's Literature: The Family Frontier* (Boston: BRILL, 2010), p. 35.

[31] Fatma refers to visiting her father when he first got sick, but this instance is not depicted in the novel. It seems safe to assume, considering the context and the precedence set by Sajir, however, that she would not have left her husband's house without his approval or accompaniment.

Fatma's father features briefly in the novel. He is the only parent Fatma knows, as her mother died giving birth to her. He is repeatedly described as distant and aloof, and his 'taste for solitude was so strong that it kept him from living' (p. 6). At first glance, their relationship seems to be a traditional Arab/Saudi one of obedient daughter and authoritative father. Mansoor makes decisions for and about Fatma, merely informing her once it is *fait accompli*. For example, one day, he suddenly tells Fatma to shower and dress because she is getting married. She does not speak a word, and a few hours later, the candidate, Sajir, shows up with a sheikh and the marriage ceremony is performed between the men only, with her father standing in for her as her male guardian. By not speaking to Mansoor, Fatma reinforces the distance between father and daughter, mirroring the example he sets of an indifferent parent. After Mansoor's death, Fatma's true feelings towards her father are revealed: 'she felt nothing at all' (p. 48) and 'as far as she was concerned, he might as well never have existed' (p. 49). She smiles as his coffin is carried out, believing that, even when living, he was dead and so his actual death is inconsequential.

The second relationship that influences and is influenced by silence is Fatma's relationship with her husband. Fatma goes into the marriage with high hopes that she will leave behind the loneliness of her father's home for a new life, 'a life of human contact' (p. 13). However, not only is Sajir just as distant as her father, he is also openly abusive, whether sexually, verbally or physically. Sajir does not try to foster any intimacy with his wife and is inclined to treat her as a servant or possession. From their very first night together, Sajir's attitude towards her seems to fluctuate between desire, fear and rage, and this sets the tone for all his interactions with her. He generally resorts to either physical or verbal abuse. For example, the first words he speaks to her after weeks of marriage—or, rather, the first words that are

revealed by the narrator—are: 'Get away [...] You're poison!' (p. 28). He is convinced she is dangerous, and he becomes ever more obsessed with the idea that her body is poisonous and will kill him. He shouts at her one night in bed: 'One scratch from you could drop a camel!' (p. 28), and he always keeps an eye on her hands, 'convinced that one day she was going to dip her fingernails in his drink and poison him' (p. 131). Sajir perceives her very body as deadly, and this is extremely important in understanding their relationship.

The power dynamics between Fatma and Sajir are quite complex in the novel. Initially, Sajir fulfils the dominant role as he sets the parameters of their relationship from the first day of their marriage. He installs Fatma in the marital home and limits her to certain rooms, forbidding her from entering others. He initiates all of their sexual encounters, and they are at his own convenience and only for his own pleasure. He sets the tone in terms of intimacy by maintaining an emotional distance at all times. However, Fatma slowly upsets the power balance. First, she defies him and enters the 'forbidden' room. This is an intriguing reference to Perrault's 'Bluebeard' story. In her analysis of the fairytale, Marina Warner states that, in an 'Oriental' version of the story, Bluebeard's wife is sometimes called Fatima and that a 'peculiar' focus of the narrative is on Fatima's act of disobedience rather than her husband's crimes, which initially swings the readers' sympathies towards the husband.[32] There is an ironic and interesting parallel with this novel's Fatma as her act of disobedience is perhaps the first step of self-determination and the beginning of her path to self-discovery, for it is after this that she is bitten by a snake and transformed into, 'a seductive woman overflowing with life' (p. 23). This initial transformation, which flags Fatma as potentially disobedient or subversive, both scares and intrigues him: 'Sajir summoned his coldness and all his other weapons. He knew

[32] Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (London: Vintage, 2012), pp. 242-3.

that he would have to tame her' (p. 23). Thus, any shift in power dynamics fills Sajir with contradictory feelings and the need to break Fatma.

Maintaining the façade of the silent obedient wife, Fatma deals with the trauma of her husband's abuse through disassociation. For instance, after explaining how Sajir takes care not to touch her body during intercourse, Fatma tells Noor: 'I've developed a certain skill […] the ability to float away […] I don't feel him anymore' (p. 90). Her choice of silence is multi-functional in this sense: at once a means of achieving a meditative or introspective state and a coping mechanism as it distances her from what he does to her body. Although Fatma does speak to Sajir, it is with as few words as possible and almost always as a response to his commands or questions—if possible, she forgoes even that and simply obeys or submits silently. Fatma initiates a conversation with Sajir twice in the novel: the first appears almost unintentional, to ask a question plaguing her about his previous wife who died in a fire. The second instance is to inform him that she is dying. In this way, Fatma is able to maintain a form of agency in that she is acting of her own volition rather than only reacting. By refusing to engage with Sajir in verbal power struggles, Fatma achieves an emotional distance from her husband and remains in a position of power/superiority in the relationship despite his role as abuser.

Fatma's body and her physical transformations are key components in the argument for silence as a subversive female mode of articulation, especially when considering the association between silence and 'body language'. Furthermore, matriarchal history manifests as a learning tool that provides insight into Fatma's present, and the significance of the mythology of snakes influences the perception of Fatma's body. Despite the novel's framework of patriarchy and the

cultural gender-based expectations that Fatma tries to live up to, once she starts to transform into a snake-woman, she begins to subtly subvert these norms as evident by the different motifs Alem employs, especially the abaya Fatma inherits from her grandmother and the snakes to which she devotes her time.

Fatma's married life begins with her being gifted her grandmother's black silk abaya by her father, in accordance with the instructions of her grandmother before her death. After her disastrous wedding night, Fatma decides to start embroidering this plain abaya using her grandmother's sewing box, and this again reaffirms the importance of matriarchal history (or herstory) for Fatma during her own search for identity. Fatma is aware of her grandmother, Shumla, as the legendary 'queen of longevity', who has outlived numerous male relatives, in addition to the dozens of men she married: 'Shumla had lived forever—or long enough, at least to witness the passing of every man in the family' (p. 6). Shumla is first seen in this novel through the eyes of Fatma, who presents a view of Shumla's fascination with patriarchal death:

> Fatma never understood the passion for life that raged in women like her […] This much Fatma did understand: her grandmother enjoyed hearing about men dying. She ruled a kingdom of dead men; she fed on their deaths. Their dying was her solace, her sustenance in an endless, miserable life (p. 7).

Fatma sees her grandmother as an old woman, confined to her room, yet holding court for the neighbouring women. This all-female space is significant because, as Fatma's mother died while in labour with her, this is the only maternal female contact Fatma experiences. It thus stands to reason that she is heavily influenced by these sessions that are characterised by her grandmother's strength of personality and her scorn of members of the other sex, as well as by the exchange of stories that invariably occur and the almost magical remedies that her grandmother prepares for the women who seek her advice in matters of the heart.

Stories of Shumla recur throughout the novel, recounted to Fatma by Shumla herself, Fatma's spirit guide and even the poet that Fatma meets in the Najran desert. These reaffirm the grandmother's position of power over men, demons and spirits, cementing her reputation as a seductress and enchantress. She even ensnares her own son, Mansoor: 'The son was utterly devoted to her, even in his dreams. Fatma's father had no interest in women other than his ancient mother' (p. 6). Interestingly, at one point, Fatma even seems to speak in her grandmother's voice, indicating that she has, in a sense, invoked or been possessed by her grandmother's spirit: 'She realized that these words, which came to her lips spontaneously, were her grandmother's rather than her own' (p. 87). This voice and these stories link Fatma to her female heritage. Despite being raised by her father, who refuses to remarry after her mother's death, Fatma is reminded that she comes from a line of strong, self-aware women, women who have outwitted and outlived men, and this builds Fatma's confidence in her own abilities. All of these stories are inherently tied to the abaya as a legacy that Shumla wills to Fatma and as a tool upon which Fatma inscribes the stories of her grandmother as well as her own.

The embroidery that Fatma chooses to add also infuses this abaya with the power of female storytelling. Each colour and pattern that Fatma sews has a specific meaning. For example, Fatma commemorates her grandmother by using the colour green for pictures from Shumla's history on the abaya. Furthermore, Fatma's embroidery has mystical functions at times—she inscribes the Arabic letters "Be" and "Aleph" with a strand of her own hair as a charm of kinds. The threads themselves are imbued with supernatural powers when, at one point, all Fatma's threads turn black 'as if her serpentine companions had soaked her sewing kit in their transformative venom' (p. 46). Here, then, is an obvious subversion of the art of

decorative embroidery; Fatma voices her stories on her abaya through the stereotyped female act of sewing, carefully choosing signs and letters that are significant and transformative, using tools that are potentially deadly. This act can be seen as linked to mystical and primeval feminine embodiment when her spirit guide encourages her to put more of herself in the world she is sewing: 'Your body is a collection of poems and spells […] Leave nothing out. Your eyebrows, your lips, your navel—they are all doors to The Invisible' (p. 47). This embroidery can thus be seen as a kind of language, a non-verbal body language, an extension of her silence.

Fatma's once plain black abaya, meant to function as a modest religious and cultural piece of clothing to cover up and protect the female body from the unwelcome and forbidden gaze of men, now becomes a defamiliarised extension of her body and her voice. This is evident in Sajir's reaction to the abaya: he calls it a 'dark hell' (p. 113) and the mere sight of it enrages him. The male porter who helps Fatma when she is ousted from her home likens the abaya to a mysterious creature, and the embroidered words 'nagged him in a language that he did not understand' (p. 2). These reactions seem to point to two divergent male perceptions of female language: its power is seen as mystical and bewildering to an ally while an antagonist would perceive it as provocative and unholy.

This is only part of Fatma's subversion of the culturally normative woman's sphere of home and hearth. Fatma's domain does not revolve around cooking, cleaning and other so-called housewifely duties but is rather a shadowy, venomous place where she devotes her time to tending to the snakes and harvesting their poisons, an unsettling alternative to conventional child-rearing. Sajir is happy to hand over the care of the snakes to his wife, as he sees it as a form of enslavement and he has always been resentful of this family business taught to him by his father. Fatma unwittingly disrupts this patrilineal inheritance, not only inserting herself as

the keeper of the snakes but also surpassing Sajir in knowledge and skill, turning it into an art form. Fatma is able to control the snakes and understand them in ways her husband never could, perhaps because she does not resent them, nor does she consider herself a slave to their needs; rather, the snakes seem to set her free and help her to understand herself and the world around her. Through her position as nurse to or keeper of the snakes, Fatma asserts her dominion over the rest of her household, subtly undermining the traditional role of homemaker by injecting or infecting it with the knowledge she gains through the snakes: 'everything in the small world of Fatma's house became hers. She came to reign over a kaleidoscopic kingdom of poisons, danger, and surpassing, deathless beauty' (p. 28). Sajir is intimidated by this power that Fatma holds over him and his home, which further fuels his resentment, and it is this that moves him to try to break her time and again, both physically and psychologically.

The snakes in this novel are a vital motif as they are active participants in Fatma's journey to discovering her true self. They are portrayed as mystical and magical, blind companions to Fatma in her waking hours and wise visionaries that are an important tool in unlocking her inner eye, so to speak. These mysterious and powerful beings have names such as Looks Can Kill, the King Snake, the Praiser and the Sewing Serpents, and they are described as being in intimate contact with the great creative essence that constitutes the source of the universe. Fatma is repeatedly associated with snakes, whether due to her role as a keeper of the snakes or her own physical appearance/transformations, making the relationship between Fatma and these creatures extremely important on both a mundane and a magical feminist level.

There is a strong element of nurturing in the relationship between Fatma and the snakes that also points to subverted norms. In the novel, it is repeatedly mentioned that the name

"Fatma" means to nurse or to nurture, and this applies to how Fatma takes care of her charges.[33] This reflects the stereotypical view of nursing or nurturing as a specifically female trait that reflects women's maternal instincts. In fact, the snakes seem to be surrogate children of sorts: Fatma feeds them, sleeps with them, monitors the temperature of their enclosures and carefully studies their movements and appearances. Her role goes beyond the mere keeper/animal dynamic and is altogether more intense as she dedicates most of her waking hours to their care and her life seems to revolve around them. The snakes give her purpose beyond the harsh realities of her abusive husband and loneliness, and they also guide her on her spiritual quest.

The link between snakes, the feminine and the supernatural—the 'Invisible World' of the novel—is thus an important component of Fatma's search for her true self and can also be traced to silence and language. Her transformation into a snake-woman reinforces her femininity, which is elevated to divinity at times in the novel and shifts the focus from the real and mundane to the magical and mystical, the inner and the hidden. Snake mythology is prevalent in many cultures, appearing as allegories for dark female power, which is turned around in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*. For example, Hend T. Al-Sudairy provides a reading of the serpent myth in Arab culture, establishing an argument for Fatma as a representation of female divinity in the novel and an expression of the female self.[34] Al-Sharqi also comments on the symbolism of snakes in the novel, indicating the relationship between the author's intent to incite 'subversive feminist thought' in the novel and the ancient role of snakes as 'guardians of female powers

---

[33] Ironically, the name is first mentioned in relation to the death of Fatma's mother: 'Grandmother Shumla named the child Fatma, meaning "The Nurturer," or "Nurse" for short—as in, "the one who nursed your own mother right out of this world"' (p. 7). Morbidity aside, it is also significant that Shumla is the one to name Fatma as it emphasizes the importance of the matriarchal bond between the two as well as Shumla's power and influence over her granddaughter.

[34] Hend T. Al-Sudairy, 'A New Reading of the Serpent Myth in the Ancient and Modern Arab Culture', *Studies in Literature and Language*, 6(1), 2013, 54–59, p. 55.

and mysteries'.[35] This is evident in how Fatma recognises that the snakes represent the creative force, or language, that forms the universe:

> She realised that unless she penetrated to the heart of silence itself she would not be able to interpret the symbols on the Wide Snakes [whose skins bore symbols of the darkest secrets of the universe]. She listened with all her might. The intensity of her listening exposed her long years of pain, and all her loneliness. This silence taught her a new language, which in turn taught her the code of the other symbols. She stood face to face with the secret longing she'd lived with all her life […] Every breath she'd ever breathed, every spark of suffering and sensation, was there, pictured in simple, eloquent circles on the skins of the snakes (p. 118).

Acheson argues that silence 'is unavoidably an embodied phenomenon. We only know it to be present because we sense it […] silence is more than heard. We feel it in our bodies'.[36] Fatma's act of listening seems to encompass all of her senses and her whole body as she strives to interpret the numinous silence of the snakes and the universe, and it is only through her own introspective silence that she is able to do so.

Most significantly, a snake bite is the catalyst for Fatma's change and the start of her spiritual journey as she experiences a rebirth of sorts and her previously hidden feminine power starts to manifest. This is evident in the description of this incident, starting with how the snake bite precipitates a cocooning of kinds. Fatma lies in an eerie state of suspended animation for a month, in 'the terrible hell where blindness mated with death' (p. 21). This darkness seems a metaphor for secret female spaces that are both deathly and deadly. Here, her death is not only expected but necessary as her body is perceived as unnatural and shocking in this state: 'It was in no way human. It was a bewitched thing' (p.22). When she unexpectedly awakens, escaping an almost certain death, she is reborn as an enchanting nymph with 'an unmistakable erotic twinkle in her eyes' (p. 23). There is an undeniable link to female sexuality here and an

[35] Al-Sharqi, 2016. p. 68.
[36] Acheson, 2008, p. 547.

uncanniness in her magical change from innocent bride to inhuman almost-corpse to seductive sexual woman. This shedding of her old persona and reappearance in a new guise reinforces Fatma's association with snakes and their seemingly supernatural abilities of rebirth. Ghadir Zannoun claims that by starting Fatma's journey with a snakebite, Alem is rewriting the snake as a source of healing and transformation, pointing to the symbology of the snake as a symbol for 'the feminine, the inner self, and the hidden and unknown'.[37] As Fatma slowly metamorphoses into a snake-woman, her feminine mystique seems to multiply, and she becomes even more uncanny.

Fatma is never perceived as fully human after the snakebite despite an emphasis on her physical beauty and allure, and it is perhaps this uncanniness that incenses Sajir and eventually drives him to insanity. After awakening from her trance, Fatma ceases to be a mere woman but seems to become the Lamia of poetry and fables, undeniably female and mysterious.[38] As Fatma becomes more familiar with the snakes, constantly spending time with them and even sleeping among them, she experiences an awakening awareness or consciousness. She then begins to unlock supernatural 'powers' that can be seen as extensions of her femininity and further emphasise her slow physical transformation into a snake-woman. For example, she develops the ability to move without making a sound—at times, this is even described as a kind of snake-like slithering: 'What frightened Sajir was the noiseless way she moved. "You can't hear her

[37] Zannoun, 2015, p. 47.

[38] Starting with the mythological figures of Medusa, Lamia and Lillith, literature is saturated with images of beautiful yet deadly snake-women. For example, Keats' 'Lamia' provides a more sympathetic depiction of a nymph-turned-snake-turned-woman, who falls in love with a mortal. H. Rider Haggard's *She* is a more colonial and Gothic portrayal of a supernatural serpent-like queen, She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed, who is born in Arabia and bathes in fire from the 'Pillar of Life' to gain immortality. More pertinent, perhaps, to the context of this novel is the tale from *The Thousand and One Nights* about Hasib and the Serpent Queen. There is a strong parallel with *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* with the narrative device of nested stories and the supernatural snake-woman that are in evidence in both texts.

coming," he muttered. "It's like she's a shadow or a flickering light. Or an actual snake"' (p. 107). Fatma also always exudes a distinct musky scent, which at times permeates the home so strongly that Sajir is forced to leave. This scent later becomes so overpowering that he becomes physically ill, and it becomes the turning point for his madness and evidence of his loss of control over the house and—by extension—over Fatma:

> Vomiting became a part of his daily routine. It was almost as if he'd come to enjoy gagging on the air itself and retching at the very thought of his enemy. He took demented pleasure in flaunting his revulsion for the kingdom from which he'd been exiled (p. 141).

It is significant that these examples of Fatma's feminine powers—her exaggerated sinuous body and musky scent—elucidate such fear and loathing in Sajir. The more snake-like his wife becomes, the more he is driven to insanity.

In addition to the snake-like qualities that Fatma gains, physical marks (mystical tattoos) appear on her skin after certain dreams or trauma that she experiences. The first is 'a thin line of dark blue fringed with wings of silver' that extends from her chin to her groin, appearing after she starts to decipher the 'music of the universe' that is invoked by the snakes (p. 37). This is later perceived by Fatma's lover-prince as 'a birthmark, a sign of her naked, natural self' (p. 94). This and similar marks highlight the importance of Fatma's body—during her otherwise silent journey towards self-discovery, her body is not just flesh and bones, but it speaks for her, communicating what she has learned through her introspection. Fatma's magical transformations are outward signs of her inner exploration and experimentation and constitute an important characteristic of Alem's blend of magical realism and feminism: questioning female identity. This is also indicative of the function of magical realism as expressed by Zamora and Faris:

> [Magical realism] is a mode suited to exploring—and transgressing—boundaries [...] Mind and body, spirit and matter, life and death, real and imaginary, self and other, male

> and female: these are boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned.[39]

Much like the signs she embroiders on her abaya, these physical marks become a part of Fatma and so meld into the language that her body expresses.

Much of Fatma's power over Sajir stems from her body and the sexual aspect of their relationship. Despite his fear and revulsion of her body, it captivates him, and he cannot resist its call. In fact, Fatma's body speaks louder than her actual voice: as she hardly speaks to him, Sajir is forced to study her body and he reads her power from it. Fatma's growing sensuality, the supernatural snake-like powers and the, 'marks of life' (p. 38) that appear on her body are all physical manifestations of her spiritual and feminine strength and progress. Sajir is aware of her body's power, but to him, it is a foreshadowing, as he tells himself: 'This snake woman is a curse. Her body is the quietest trap in the world, but when it snaps shut, that's the end, it's death' (p. 54). An intriguing dimension here is how sex is almost equated with death, linking to the Freudian concepts of the pleasure and death drives or Eros and Thanatos. Fatma's body, with its inherent eroticism, represents self-preservative sexual instincts (Eros); however, Sajir perceives her body as deadly, aligning it with the death drive (Thanatos).[40] He is drawn in by the promise of sexual pleasure just as he is repelled by the possibility of death through contact with her body. This is further enhanced by Sajir's perception of both Fatma's body and silence as predatory—he is the prey and she the huntress, and this perhaps fuels him to take back control by conquering her body.

---

[39] Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, 'Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s', in *Magical Realism*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 1–11 <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822397212-001>, pp. 4-5

[40] For more details about Freud's theories on the dualistic relationship between life and death instincts, see *On Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'*, ed. by Salman Akhtar and Mary Kay O'Neil (London: Karnac, 2011).

Fatma's body is the object of Sajir's dark obsession and any manifestation of voice seems to increases his anger and brutality towards her. For example, she starts to grind her teeth in her sleep, driving Sajir almost to distraction—he names the sound 'Vengeance Birds' since it prevents him from sleeping. He first attempts to solve the problem by tying a bridle on Fatma's jaw, literally silencing her, but this fails, and he is eventually advised by a friend that '[w]ater […] would silence the whips that provoked the wife's intolerable singing' (p. 64). Sajir then orders Fatma to sleep in a coffin-like trough filled with water, which puts a stop to the noise but still throws him into a rage:

> He felt utterly defeated by the heedless attack of the helpless woman whose husband he had the misfortune to be. He regarded the incident as a show of strength on Fatma's part; that was obvious from the energized rippling of the water she was sleeping in. He began to see her as a forbidden island in the middle of a sea spiked by thunderbolts (p. 64).

Fatma's silent inscrutability and self-possession thwart Sajir's attempts tries to reclaim his authority and superiority, meaning he continues to feel powerless and emasculated. Fatma's body speaks for her and gives her strength, and when she eventually rebels against Sajir, it is not through verbally denouncing him but, rather, her body 'ferociously' turns against him without any conscious effort on her part. The emphasis is on the physicality of this rejection as it takes place during sexual intercourse and results in injury to Sajir's manhood: Fatma's body becomes 'as hard as emerald' and traps Sajir's 'sword' and it is only by beating Fatma and blasting her with hot water that her body eventually releases him of this torment. Sajir's final attempt to reclaim his dominance is by literally throwing Fatma out into the street. However, Fatma has become too powerful in her own right and, when she returns and dies on his doorstep, she precipitates a chain reaction that destroys Sajir. He undergoes a symbolic death of his own when the snakes turn into dust and he promptly forgets everything he ever knew about them:

> The cold crept into his soul and memory, and soon he lost whatever awareness he'd ever had […] leaving his mind naked before the world […] He lost all feeling for

> how to catch snakes and how to care for them. He was a stranger to them now, and every fang was a threat (p. 148).

He can no longer manipulate and use the snakes—or Fatma—for his personal gain but, more importantly, he is no longer a threat. The death of Fatma's body results in the loss of the source of his power over her: his knowledge and his fearlessness of snakes.

It is worth noting how the power of Fatma's body is also evident in another incident of subverted gender norms in the novel and that is bearing children. In the latter part of the novel, despite being labelled barren by Sajir, Fatma believes herself pregnant. She paints magical symbols on her body to stimulate this pregnancy and desperately renews her efforts to decode the signs that would unlock the secrets of the universe. How she became pregnant is not clear: is it the nomad desert prince whose fiery embraces only seemed to take place in dreams; the snakes amongst whom she sleeps and who have the power to spark life; or the lightning that struck her over and over in the deserts of Najran? The timing makes it seem unlikely that her husband is the father, which further drives the mystery; is Fatma pregnant or not? This uncertainty is strategic, defamiliarising the normally mundane expectations of childbearing through the magical feminist elements of the novel. Here, emphasis is placed on Fatma as the life-giving mother, omitting the role of the male in the process by never explicitly showing who the father of the child is. Dream after dream seems to reinforce Fatma's feeling of rebirth, and she is described as a 'furnace of creation' (p. 132), ecstatic with the life force growing within her. Most noteworthy about this is that it is never explicitly stated that Fatma is actually pregnant—rather, her state is always described as a feeling.

The importance of this power of propagation for Fatma is revealed after Sajir apparently causes her to miscarry by assaulting her. As the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back, it precipitates Fatma's bodily rebellion. After this miscarriage Fatma dreams of the unleashing

of a great fire serpent that moves from village to village, 'seeding the land with death, leaving nothing but cinders in its wake' (p. 135). In her dreams, Fatma searches for this mythical serpent, exhausting herself as she follows its death-strewn trail in order to battle and conquer it, but she can never seem to catch up to it. Parallel to this, in the real world outside of her home, deadly fires are sweeping through the land, killing many in its wake. The lines are blurred yet again between fantasy and reality in the novel, seeming to highlight Fatma's anguish at her loss. The out-of-control and devastating fire seems a part of her. In her final moments as she transforms, dissolving from snake into spirit, she feels whole and complete for perhaps the first time in her life, and she is finally able to destroy the fire serpent that has manifested from her pain. The death of her physical body is not the end: her spirit, her essence, her true self flows into the great river of life—that spiritual world where she can finally be alive: 'I'm going to a world where I'll be able to show my true face […] Part of me has already gone on ahead to the invisible world. I can be myself there, I can be truly alive' (p. 145). This pronouncement, in conjunction with the magical feminist elements of Fatma's ending, underscores the significance of finding a means of self-expression that can truly communicate female experiences.

Fatma: A Novel of Arabia is a story about one woman's journey to find her voice despite her experiences of trauma. On a narrative level, this polyphonic text incorporates multiple voices, emphasising the relationship between female bodies and language. Alem's hybrid authorial voice, coupled with the transformative nature of Fatma's "body" language and the legacy of female or matriarchal storytelling, allow for a feminine dialogic reading of this text. Additionally, the introspective silence of Fatma indicates how this voice provides her with the means to discover an embodied language that facilitates communication and allows for the expression of female identity, bearing out Vanessa Guignery's argument that '[s]peech and

silence are instruments of power, of self-assertion and self-definition'.[41] The magical feminism of the novel also contributes to the disorienting and subversive nature of Fatma's silence, revealing how she challenges gender norms and eventually breaks free from patriarchal restrictions. Alem ensures that death is not the end for Fatma as her inner spirit joins the great river of life, embodied as a universal language that all creatures can learn to speak.

[41] Guignery, 2009, p. 6.

Chapter Two

Women Behind Bars: Silence and Self-Preservation in *The Golden Chariot*

The previous chapter explored the use of silence as a means of introspection in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*, delving into the mysticism of the main character's world and the intricacies of her physical and psychological transformations as she searches for the language to express her inner self. The novel features elements of magical feminism, polyphonic narrative strategies and subverted tropes and motifs that function to privilege female voices and the matriarchal legacy of storytelling while also providing a critique of patriarchal dominance within certain social constructs. Fatma's experiences of trauma are reflected in her silence as she completes a journey to achieve self-agency and -fulfilment.

In this chapter, I explore silence in *The Golden Chariot* by Egyptian writer Salwa Bakr, within the context of an all-female space that allows for the voicing of different experiences of trauma. This novel depicts nuanced examples of silenced and silent women using complex narrative structures and the practical implementation of a "feminine" language that challenges gendered binaries and enact a sense of self-preservation and agency. Originally written in Arabic in 1991, *The Golden Chariot* is about Aziza the Alexandrian, an inmate in a women's prison, who has decided to escape to heaven on a golden chariot pulled by winged horses. Aziza chooses different women from the prison to accompany her. By means of a series of nested stories, each character's crime and backstory is revealed through her eyes and that of a third-person omniscient narrator. I will analyse how these different levels of narration and the architecture of the novel as a whole influence the voicing of the characters' experiences. Furthermore, I consider the implications of these women's silences in light of their stories as the survivors of trauma. From the confines of the prison setting, they relive their violent pasts,

and their experiences reveal the plight of women in a brutally patriarchal, misogynistic society that systematically oppresses them.

Salwa Bakr is an Egyptian writer who has published several novels, short stories and essays in Arabic that portray the plight of women in Egyptian society, particularly those who have been marginalised and oppressed. Her journey to becoming a writer was not an easy one as she claims that she was 'submerged in illusions' until the age of thirty—illusions that led her to maintain traditional values to please others and to associate her self-worth with her relationship with a man: 'I was brought up like millions of girls of my generation, with the idea that I had no existence without a man'.[1] Such an attitude is typical when the basic building block of that society is the patrilineal, patriarchal family unit, ensuring that a woman's place in that society is almost always in reference to the men around her, whether father, brother, husband or even son.[2] Despite the advances in Egyptian women's educational and political rights by the 1980s and '90s, when the novel is set, women were still expected to fulfil traditional domestic-based roles.

Bakr can be categorised as a writer who makes use of what Ferial Ghazoul calls 'magical dualism', defined by Carline Seymour-Jorn as 'the successful fusion of politically or socially committed literature with artistically innovative literary techniques'.[3] Bakr attempts to navigate

---

[1] Salwa Bakr, 'Writing as a Way Out', *in In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. by Fadia Faqir, trans. by Shirley Eber (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 35–39, p. 35, p. 36.

[2] This is most apparent in how men and married women in Arab societies are traditionally called by their *kunya*, which is a teknonym derived from their eldest male child's name. For example, the parents of a child named Ali would be called *Abu Ali* and *Umm Ali* (father and mother of Ali). In some cases, unmarried men who are still childless are called by their kunya as reference to what they anticipate they will name their firstborn son. In cases where a married couple does not have any sons, the kunya can sometimes be derived from the eldest daughter's name or the parents' actual names are used instead. For more details, see: Khalil, Amr, and Larina Tatiana, 'Arabic Forms Of Address: Sociolinguistic Overview', ed. by I. V. Denisova, *Word, Utterance, Text: Cognitive, Pragmatic and Cultural Aspects*, 39.European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences (2018), 299–309 <https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2018.04.02.44>

[3] Seymour-Jorn, 2011, p. xvii.

dominant patriarchal discourse by developing what she calls a 'new language' that can express women's experiences. Seymour-Jorn claims that, in using this language, Bakr aims 'to disrupt the status quo, to condemn the structure of relations, the concepts, values and norms that prevail in Egyptian society', which she believes account for women's unhappiness.[4] I will explore how Bakr's new language is characterised by its experimentation with female lexicon and structures and its disruption of binary oppositions. Some of her strategies include the use of diglossia, which Mushira Eid defines as a dichotomy of two varieties of Arabic, digressive linguistic patterns and alternate modes of reference and description.[5] This allows Bakr to disrupt the traditional conventions of writing while also mimicking the speech patterns of women. Additionally, Bakr's adoption of the nested story and Arabesque format helps to add layers of discourse and meaning, which, in turn, contribute to the overall objective of disruption. The definitions and significance of the Arabesque as outlined by Seymour-Jorn and Marina Warner indicate the importance of the narrative structure in depicting prison life in *The Golden Chariot*.

A key feature of the novel lies in the sharing of stories and the testimonies of the female characters. The complex narrative structure contributes to this, with the frame story of Aziza that then incorporates the stories of other characters such as Hinna and Shafiqa, two of the inmates that she chooses to accompany her on the chariot. Each of these characters has witnessed or experienced trauma and their use of silence is an indication of how they handle that trauma. Some of the characters choose to break their silence while others take their stories to the grave, but in each case, the choice to speak or not is a conscious one that ties in with the need to protect themselves. I will thus analyse the silence of three characters, Aziza, Hinna and

---

[4] Seymour-Jorn, 2002, p. 160.
[5] Mushira Eid, 'Language Is a Choice: Variation in Egyptian Women's Written Discourse', in *Language Contact and Language Conflict in Arabic*, ed. by Aleya Rouchdy (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), pp. 203–32, p. 204.

Shafiqa, while also exploring the implications of community and the female-only space in providing a space for storytelling and sharing in this context. The multiple storylines and nested stories demonstrate examples of oral testimonials that are refracted through the lens of the third-person omniscient narrator and the (unreliable) witness, Aziza, as well as the implications of the polyphonic/dialogic nature of the text.

The Golden Chariot revolves around the main character, Aziza the Alexandrian, an inmate at a women's prison. Through a series of flashbacks and memories, the reader is taken through what she calls her 'strange life'.[6] She comes from a prosperous background, with her childhood and teenage years spent living in a large mansion with her blind mother and a caring stepfather. However, it is revealed that Aziza's stepfather has groomed her from an early age and is sexually abusing her. She spends years in a silent and secret relationship with him, without anyone uncovering the abuse. After the death of her unsuspecting mother and years of abuse, her stepfather/lover plans to marry another woman, and Aziza kills him, as she now believes him to be a 'dangerous criminal' and 'demon in disguise' (p. 8). She murders him while preserving the secrecy of their relationship and this is why she is in prison for life. At the time when she relates her story, she has become an old woman.

Years after her crime, while mentally reliving and revelling in the beautiful memories of her lover/abuser in the confines of the prison, Aziza decides to create a golden chariot pulled by winged horses that will take her to heaven. She does not want to undertake this journey

---

[6] Salwa Bakr, *The Golden Chariot*, trans. by Dinah Manisty, (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1991), p. 18. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

alone, and so sets about choosing worthy passengers from amongst the other inmates to accompany her on a journey to the heavens. Through embedded narratives and both real and imagined conversations, the omniscient narrator, sometimes through the filter of Aziza, discloses the life stories and tragedies of the thirteen candidates whom Aziza chooses as companions. The inmates are from a variety of social and educational backgrounds and have been incarcerated for wildly different crimes, ranging from murder and vagrancy to prostitution and medical malpractice, but a common denominator in most of their stories is that they have been victims of an oppressive patriarchy. For example, one of the inmates is in prison in place of her brother, who killed her abusive husband. Another inmate, an upper-class widow, murdered her brother-in-law when he was granted custody of her children and power of attorney over her late husband's assets and finances. Yet another inmate was sentenced to prison for castrating her lover after he exploited her and threatened to sully her reputation. In addition to these crimes, many of the women are diagnosed as mentally unstable. Two of the women that Aziza chooses to ascend with are Hinna and Shafiqa.

Hinna is an old woman who is in prison for killing her husband. She hides the reason why she committed this crime, especially from her children and the judge and lawyers involved in her case. However, in the intimate space of Aziza's cell, Hinna relates the story of her life, starting with how, as a new bride, she discovers her husband's 'insatiable appetite for the opposite sex' (p. 39). This leads to a life of torment for Hinna, who endures physical pain, medical issues and marital rape throughout forty-five years of marriage. Hinna suffers in silence, not revealing to a single person the physical, emotional and psychological abuse. Eventually, her husband expresses his wish to take a second wife who will be able to keep up with his unflagging sexual appetite. Angry at his shamelessness and fearing that she would be turned out into the street with the arrival of a new woman, Hinna decides that the only way out

is to kill her husband. Despite her attempts to make it look like an accident, her role in her husband's death is discovered, and she is sentenced to prison.

On the other hand, Silent Shafiqa, as she is named by the prison inmates, is a pitiful enigmatic figure. Despite her obvious 'confused state of mind' (p. 163) and demented appearance, she is considered harmless by officials and the other inmates as she is calm and devoid of malice. Shafiqa is also completely mute, which means that nobody—including Aziza—knows her true story, the details of which are revealed by the omniscient narrator. Shafiqa lives with her family, who are cared for by the eldest widowed sister. This sister embarks upon a secret love affair, which is eventually discovered by the men of the family. Under the pretext of "cleansing" the family honour, Shafiqa's father and brother have the sister killed and buried in the desert. After learning the truth, Shafiqa runs away from home. Her tremendous grief and pain bring about physical transformations that, in a sense, disguise her and give her the appearance of a vagrant. She sleeps in the streets and, despite never actually begging, is repeatedly convicted of this crime until she becomes a permanent inmate of the women's prison.

By the end of the novel, Aziza has made her selections and planned the ascent to the heavens down to the smallest detail. She plots and worries about how they will make their escape on the chariot until, finally, one night, she envisages all of the chosen inmates coming together for a dignified ceremony to begin their ascent to heaven. However, chaos ensues as Aziza imagines the prison governor and warders surrounding the chariot and trying to stop the inmates from leaving, but the women remain on board so that the winged horses and chariot can take off. Abruptly, as the chariot starts to ascend, Aziza's heart gives out and she dies.

The Golden Chariot epitomises Bakhtin's polyphonic stylistics of the novel with its 'diversity of individual voices, artistically organized'.[7] Bakr's novel is carefully constructed to optimise the inherent multi-voiced nature of a polyphonic novel, incorporating as it does the voices of the third-person omniscient narrator, the main character of Aziza and the thirteen women whose stories are portrayed, as well as numerous men, women and children who play different roles in the lives of these female characters. Underlying all of these is the authorial voice of Salwa Bakr herself, which shapes the narrative through her experimentation with creating what she calls a 'new language'. Each voice is significant and, rather than becoming a discordant cacophony, the narrative structure and textual strategies of the novel impose order to allow these (female) voices to be heard and to depict an alternative version of female solidarity and community despite the characters' turbulent emotions, abusive relationships, violent crimes, lost innocence and fragile dreams.

One of the most striking polyphonic features of this novel is the sheer number of characters and voices, which are all conveyed through the narrator. The third-person omniscient narrator recounts the story of Aziza, who is the lynchpin that holds the novel together. Her tale is the frame around which the other thirteen characters' stories are structured and her voice is doubly significant because she not only speaks for herself, but for the other characters too. In this sense, she functions as a secondary narrator—she recalls or recounts other characters' stories. The characters' voices are sometimes twice removed, filtered as they are through Aziza and then the omniscient narrator, which means the reader experiences the characters both at a distance and from a subjective viewpoint. John Pier identifies three levels of narrative that describe the relationship between an act of narration and the diegesis—or the universe within

[7] Bakhtin, 1981, p. 262.

which the story takes place: extradiegetic, the (intra)diegetic and metadiegetic narrators.[8] In *The Golden Chariot*, the omniscient narrator represents the extradiegetic level, as they recount what occurs at the first level of diegesis without being part of the story. Aziza is on the diegetic level as the main character in the story and, as a secondary narrator, her experience of the characters' speaking their stories represents a metadiegetic narrative (or metanarrative).[9]

The constant shift between these different levels of narration is another key part of what Al-Nowaihi calls Bakr's 'poetics of disorientation'.[10] It contributes to the non-linearity of the narrative—as an intrinsic component of the Arabesque or nested story format—while also emphasising the polyphony of the text. This narrative pattern also becomes further disorienting because Aziza is portrayed as mentally unstable in the novel with hints that her 'amazingly vivid memory' (p. 18) has now started to fail her, meaning the commentary or information she provides in her role of narrator is problematic or biased, undeniably colouring the readers' judgement. This is evident when she describes or introduces different characters, expressing an opinion that is usually based on her personal prejudices and an innate snobbery. For example, she forms a negative view of characters who are from lower-class and uneducated backgrounds, linking that with criminality: 'Aziza had never liked Umm Ragab who, in her opinion was the very embodiment of vulgarity and crookedness' (p. 24) and 'she had never liked nor respected Safiyya because, as far as she was concerned, she was a tramp with a criminal nature' (p. 134). On the other hand, she expresses favourable views about characters who help her, like Bahiga,

---

[8] John Pier, 'Narrative Levels', in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. by Peter Hühn and others, 2nd edn (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 547–63, p. 547.

[9] See Pier, 2014: Wolf Schmid proposes more "user-friendly" terminology to modify these terms: 'In place of extra-, intra- and metadiegetic, the terms primary, secondary and tertiary are employed to designate narrators and levels of embedding' (pp. 552-3).

[10] Magda M. Al-Nowaihi, 'Reenvisioning National Community in Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot Does Not Ascend to Heaven*', *The Arab Studies Journal*, 7/8.2/1 (1999), 8–24, p. 11.

a doctor who has been imprisoned for a medical mistake and who gives her (free) medical advice: 'Aziza […] credited Bahiga with many qualities: her education, her refinement […] She behaved in a dignified, straight manner without being self-indulgent and trivial' (p. 158). Aziza's subjective narrative voice expresses a colourful and idiosyncratic viewpoint that exemplifies Bakr's depiction of realistic women who are flawed. This contrasts with the (extradiegetic) omniscient narrator, who dispassionately reports on the characters' actions and backstories, revealing details of which Aziza is unaware and offering an unbiased base narrative. This is evident, for example, with the story of Shafiqa: none of the inmates knows anything about her because she is mute. However, the omniscient narrator tells Shafiqa's story and her past, including her real name, Taghrid, which is also indicated in the title of the chapter, 'Grief of the Sparrows' (Taghrid means the singing of birds in Arabic).

The polyphony of *The Golden Chariot* is also evident in Bakr's experimentation with an alternative 'feminine' language that portrays women's experiences and consciousness. An important component of her linguistic experimentation is the use of diglossia, which can be defined in Arabic-speaking communities as language duality, 'a culturally perceived dichotomy between two varieties: colloquial, or *'ammiyya*, and literary, or *fusha*. One is the spoken everyday language of communication; the other is the literary variety and medium of written communication'.[11] The use of *fusha* in spoken communication denotes formality or didacticism and is rarely used in everyday speech by native Arabic speakers.[12] Diglossia features in the

[11] Eid, 2003, p. 204.

[12] Traditionally, *fusha* is the standard Arabic that is taught in schools—it is the language that is used in the Quran and in formal discourse and is generally uniform throughout the Arab world. Colloquial Arabic, or '*ammiyya*, is the informal, mostly spoken version and differs depending on several factors, including dialect, geographical location and socioeconomic status. For a more detailed comparison, see: Abdulkafi Albirini, *Modern Arabic Sociolinguistics: Diglossia, Variation, Codeswitching, Attitudes and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2015) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315683737>.

original Arabic version, for example, with *fusha* words or expressions interspersing the everyday colloquial speech of the female characters. The English version of *The Golden Chariot* cannot accurately represent this linguistic idiosyncrasy, and so diglossia is mostly lost in translation, as there is no real equivalent to some words in English. There are some examples of translated colloquialisms, such as, 'on my mother's soul' (p. 110). However, the use of *fusha* can be inferred in the English translation with the quoted verses from the Holy Qur'an or sayings by the Prophet Mohammad, both of which would originally occur in standard Arabic. These examples often appear in the stories of the more educated or middle-class women in the novel, such as Aziza and the doctor Bahiga, who would presumably be more familiar with using more formal standard Arabic.[13]

As an anglophone text, the issue of diglossia in *The Golden Chariot* does prompt questions about the authenticity of the voices of both Bakr and her characters in the translated version of the novel. As Al-Nowaihi points out, the novel is rich with the cultural codes of everyday Egyptian life and, since the humour is often at the expense of these codes, it, 'is much diminished in the English translation'.[14] This certainly plays a role in how effectively the voices of the author and her characters are heard through the medium of the translator's voice and the target language. The translator—in this case, Dinah Manisty—has a research background in Egyptian women writers and the language, which, in the words of Faqir in her introduction to the novel, allows Manisty to, 'preserve the local colours in the translation'.[15] Furthermore, the original Arabic version of the novel's title is abbreviated in this English translation, which

[13] For examples of diglossia from the original Arabic text, see Seymour-Jorn, 2002, p. 161 and Seymour-Jorn, 2011, p. 25.
[14] Al-Nowaihi, 1999, p. 21.
[15] Fadia Faqir, 'Introduction', in *The Golden Chariot*, by Salwa Bakr, trans. by Dinah Manisty, Arab Women Writers (Reading: Garnet, 1991), p. vi.

elucidates questions of how this impacts the interpretation of the novel's themes. Moore argues that, '[t]he fact that Bakr's original title [...] translates as "the golden chariot *does not reach the sky"* signals the provisional nature of emancipation through narration'.[16] Extrapolating this to the title as it stands could be seen to indicate a more positive view of this emancipation.

The meta-narrative elements of *The Golden Chariot* reveal Bakr's deliberate voicing strategies. For example, in one tongue in cheek scene, Bakr writes a description of her characters' storytelling style. Aziza is entranced by Umm El-Khayr's account of her past 'despite the traditional peasant style which characterised her narration. It was a slow process which involved repetition, additions and embellishments full of description and simile and a great deal of darting from one story to another' (p. 72). Here, Bakr deliberately delineates the style that she has developed to reflect her vision of everyday Egyptian women's speech patterns and that is in evidence throughout the novel. In another scene, Hinna captivates Aziza and another inmate when recounting the peculiar and exciting tale of her life with her husband 'simply and fluently, as if she were telling the story of a good film she had recently seen' (p. 37). The inmate is described as listening with 'ardent zeal' even forgetting the water she is boiling for tea, because it is a tale worth listening to and so that she can memorise and relate it to her friends, thus relieving their boredom. Here, Bakr highlights the importance of storytelling in the microcosm of the prison (which is also applicable to other female spaces) as both a performative act and an act of sharing.

This analysis of the polyphonic features of *The Golden Chariot* shows the dominance of female voices and narratives, further emphasising the feminist dialogism of the novel. Bakr's text attempts to disrupt patriarchal hierarchies by focusing on writing women whose voices

[16] Moore, 2008, p. 163 (author's emphasis).

emerge, not as singular separate entities, but as a diverse multitude that is nonetheless unified in how different experiences are expressed. In an interview, Bakr criticises both men and women authors for failing to write good female characters: 'In most cases, women continue to write from a man's point of view on the world, because the foundational literary references are those written by men'.[17] *The Golden Chariot* exemplifies her attempts to write from a woman's point of view and provide representation for women who might otherwise be overlooked, and the most significant way that she does this is by challenging the dominant discourse.

Through the act of writing and communicating female experiences of trauma and oppression, Bakr presents her own vision for a 'way out' from societal pressures on women to conform. She explains how the act of writing allows her to represent her true self:

> [W]riting was my true saviour […] It was the real impulse that protected me from either madness or suicide […] writing presented me with a golden opportunity to be myself, outside the frameworks, the institutions, the customary system of values and norms.[18]

However, this escape is also fraught with its own challenges and obstacles—from Bakr's point of view, there is a need for a means of communication that can express the female self and experience, a project that she has taken upon herself:

> I wanted to try to create a new language (*lugha jadida*) in writing, a language to express myself, my consciousness and my understandings on the one hand, and on the other hand, a language to solve problems within the writing itself, as it relates to women.[19]

This aligns with the concerns of feminist critics and feminist dialogism and their emphasis on modes of female expression, gendered (meta-)language and multiplicity of meaning within

---

[17] Elisabeth Jaquette, 'ArabLit Re-Runs: Salwa Bakr on "Women and Arabic Literature"', *ArabLit and ArabLit Quarterly*, 16 June 2014.
[18] Bakr, 1998, p. 37.
[19] Seymour-Jorn, 2002, p. 160.

discourse. In particular, Bakr's *lugha jadida* reflects her attempts to disrupt binary patriarchal paradigms. Shoshana Felman points to the problems with reconsidering the position of women within a dualistic system of reference: 'How can the woman be thought about outside of the Masculine/Feminine framework, *other* than as opposed to man, without being subordinated to a primordial masculine model?'[20] The issue is broached by critics such as Elaine Showalter, who considers women's writing 'a "double-voiced discourse" that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant', and so it is a discourse that exists both inside and outside the male tradition simultaneously.[21] Bakr's new language reflects such attempts to locate women's writing both within and without the dominant male discourse, subverting it by utilising female syntactic and linguistic structures in her work. This language can be considered the practical fruition of Cixous' *l'écriture féminine* and Irigaray's *parler-femme*, both of which are critical frameworks for a language that can express women's bodies and voices.[22]

The Golden Chariot focuses attention on the plight of marginalised women in Egyptian society, especially the precarious position of those who are poor and/or uneducated or hold socially ambiguous roles such as divorcees and widows. Bakr states: 'I write about women who are rarely seen by others […] My characters are women who remain unobtrusive and for whom

---

[20] Shoshana Felman, 'Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy', *Diacritics*, 5.4 (1975), 2–10 <https://doi.org/10.2307/464958>, p. 4 (author's emphasis).

[21] Elaine Showalter, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', *Critical Inquiry*, 8.2 (1981), 179–205, p. 201, p. 202.

[22] Showalter indicates that Gilbert and Gubar label the double-voiced discourse of women's writing a palimpsest (1981, p. 204). See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 73: They provide a definition of palimpsestic works as those, 'whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning', whereby women writers manage, 'the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards'.

no one has any use'.[23] She draws on her own experiences as the daughter of a widow, which, in a sense, opened her eyes to the difficulties faced by women like her mother. The themes of her stories reflect the underlying socio-political and psychological issues faced by women who are invariably forced to rely on themselves and are at the mercy of a patriarchal system that has suppressed/oppressed them. These themes, which have become common in modern Egyptian literature, include features listed by Roswitha Badry such as '[t]he lack of personal freedom as a result of restrictive social attitudes, the oppression of the poor due to economic policies, government corruption, and the hypocrisy of those who wield power and authority'.[24] Each of the women in the prison has experienced a combination of these.

The Golden Chariot reveals how Bakr was influenced by the socio-political and economic upheavals in Egypt during her formative years, under the regimes of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952-70) and Anwar Sadat (1970-81), especially in terms of the changing role of Egyptian women. This undercurrent is evident in the stories of many of Aziza's companions, with almost throwaway references that reflect how the men and women of Egypt were impacted on a more personal or individual level. For example, Safiyya is an inmate who worked hard as a thief to provide an income, determined to fulfil the dream of sending her sons to university, 'a dream held by thousands of the poor after Nasser announced free education for all' (p. 129). Despite the irony here, this reflects how Nasser's rule was characterised by 'an ambitious program of political and social reform', with women viewed as fully enfranchised citizens and national

---

[23] Claudia Mende, 'Profile of the Egyptian Writer Salwa Bakr: The Voice of the Marginalized', *Qantara.De*, 2012 <https://en.qantara.de/content/profile-of-the-egyptian-writer-salwa-bakr-the-voice-of-the-marginalized> [accessed 10 April 2022].

[24] Roswitha Badry, 'Socially Marginalised Women in Selected Narratives of Egyptian Female Writers', *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis*, 13.4 (2018), 257–69 <https://doi.org/10.4467/20843933ST.18.022.9475>, p. 262.

subjects, with a role in building a modern Egyptian nation.[25] In this case, it includes raising and educating the next generation of Egyptian patriots. On the other hand, Sadat's regime was characterised by his enactment of economic policies that boosted mass consumption.[26] He also implemented foreign policies that led to closer ties with Western democracies.[27] References to this are peppered in different stories—a comparison is made between the two regimes in one story, in terms of how the tight control over imports from the West 'under Nasser's stringent economic policy', resulted in an illicit trade that later formed the base of 'a much wider trade boom when restrictions with the West were lifted under Sadat' (p. 152). Elsewhere, when a bottle of imported perfume is mentioned, 'Sadat's new economic policy' (p. 167) is alluded to as a welcome alternative to the previous regime's boycott of the West.

Such context plays a direct role in *The Golden Chariot* despite the seemingly subtle and, at times, sly references to the national landscape in terms of social hierarchies and economic power politics. For example, Bahiga, the doctor, is in prison for administering a fatal dose of anaesthetic to a child. This happens while she moonlights as an anaesthetist in addition to her duties as a doctor in a clinic in order to earn a living wage. Notably, the male operating doctor is only fined while she, a woman and a poor one at that, is imprisoned for three years. Bahiga is described as fortunate to have studied medicine as a result of Nasser's free education scheme, yet the pitfalls are made apparent: her family's poverty and low social status means she cannot compete with others from the middle and upper classes who have the advantages of wealth and connections to help their careers. Additionally, Nasser's regime is blamed for 'the tyrants of

---

[25] Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 3.
[26] Nadje Al-Ali, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 31.
[27] Selma Botman, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 75.

medicine' (p. 145) that hold a monopoly over the hospitals and prevent doctors like Bahiga from the means for professional advancement, financial gain and social mobility. These factors severely restrict Bahiga's marriage options, and Bahiga finds herself 'consigned to oblivion' in a government-run hospital where she can only mark time: 'Her constant questioning of the reality of her existence and the absurdity of her social position drove her to a mild form of madness. She struggled with the conflict which arose from being respected but not valued' (p. 146). Bahiga's story reveals the causality of the socio-economic environment on Egyptian women's social status and mental health. This is also compounded by the stark reality of Egyptian women at the time who, despite seemingly improved educational and employment opportunities, still faced immense pressure to conform to societal expectations—in this case, finding a suitable husband who can provide financial and emotional support.

The women of *The Golden Chariot* are all survivors of trauma, and this impacts their speech and silence. As each of their back-stories are revealed, so does the systematic oppressive silencing of these women become apparent. As Robyn Fivush explains: 'Silencing occurs at the cultural level for experiences that do not fit the culturally dominant narrative'.[28] The inmates have all experienced some form of abuse during their lives yet social conditioning or even direct threats prevent these women from speaking about those experiences that do not fit the cultural narrative of the good, obedient daughter or wife who is protected by her male guardian. Therefore, their trauma must be hidden behind a mask of silence, indicating the significant role of family and society within this context in suppressing female voices that could disrupt the status quo or distort the image of the perfect, honourable family unit.

[28] Robyn Fivush, 'Speaking Silence: The Social Construction of Silence in Autobiographical and Cultural Narratives', *Memory*, 18.2 (2010), 88–98 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658210903029404>, p. 91.

Through their struggles to survive or resist abuse, the women in *The Golden Chariot* commit acts that are deemed criminal that signify a shift in how they perceive themselves and how they use their voices. Silence, as a part of that voice, also shifts to become a form of self-preservation, masking trauma. However, Bakr implements her conceptualisation of a feminine language through which women's voices are foregrounded, allowing them to communicate their experiences of trauma in different ways. For example, most of the inmates utilise the unique prison space to share their stories in a form of "talking cure". Latham explains this technique stipulates that confronting a trauma is beneficial because talking about a traumatic experience helps to achieve catharsis by expressing pent-up emotions or to attain insight into the causes of the trauma'.[29] Therefore, both speech and silence are influenced by trauma and understanding the context of the women's experiences allows for insight into how they voice their experiences.

Bakr breaks down traditional binary oppositions in *The Golden Chariot* through challenging the normative binaries that align 'female' with lack, absence, insanity, silence and passivity. This novel is filled with characters that, while sometimes silent, nonetheless question the gender-biased binary of woman as a silent object and man as the speaking subject. This is significant from a feminist dialogic viewpoint because breaking down such constructs allows *The Golden Chariot* to move away from 'patriarchal metaphysics' by skewing expectations and constantly remaining in flux, resulting in a discourse that privileges women's experiences. Faqir argues that, in this novel, 'standard perceptions of masculine and feminine language are rejected and from a third space within the language they question a culture which misrepresents their

[29] Monica Latham, 'Breaking the Silence and Camoflauging Voices in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*', in *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English*, ed. by Vanessa Guignery (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2009), pp. 130–47. p. 136.

experiences'.[30] For example, the chapter entitled 'Mercy Before Justice' in *The Golden Chariot* opens with a female prison warder, Mahrousa, submitting to the ministrations of one of the inmates, Safiyya the heroin addict, to remove the hairs and blemishes from her face.[31] The casual back and forth between the women during this mundane female ritual of removing hair with honey and thread contrasts with the prison setting, normalising the act and highlighting the familiarity between prisoner and warder. In fact, the two consider themselves sisters. Another way in which Bakr transcends dualistic hierarchies is that she notably does not place men in direct opposition to women nor does she hold men (as a whole gender) accountable for women's trauma. Bakr states in an interview:

> I do not believe that man is responsible for the unhappiness of woman […] I deliberately portrayed man with no distinct features as a marginalized figure [...] I do not condemn man as a race or sex but I do condemn the overall shape of our lives, the preconceived ideas which we accept as natural givens though they are not so, and should not be. I condemn the common, the familiar, the taken-for-granted.[32]

This explains why, in *The Golden Chariot*, none of the male characters are named. Instead, they are mostly referred to in terms of their relationships with the women: Aziza's stepfather, Hinna's husband and Shafiqa's brother. This can be seen as a subversion of traditional cultural paradigms in Arab societies in which names are patrilineal and linked to the eldest male descendants through a *kunya*.

Bakr's new language thus points to the fragmentation of social hierarchies, allowing what Ayman Abu-Shomar calls 'third space positioning', in which 'identities are always in flux, split

---

[30] Faqir, 2007, p. v.

[31] In another display of Bakr's tongue in cheek humour, the names of these two women ironically do not reflect their reality: "Mahrousa" in Arabic means protected or safeguarded—the character proves to be anything but. On the other hand, "Safiyya" means pure, which belies her reputation as a heroin addict and thief.

[32] Hoda El Sadda, 'Women's Writing in Egypt: Reflections on Salwa Bakr', in *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, ed. by Deniz Kandiyoti (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), pp. 127–44, p.133.

between two or more worlds, cultures, and languages'.[33] In the case of *The Golden Chariot*, this includes binary pairings of male/female, sanity/insanity, standard Arabic/colloquial Egyptian and so on. Additionally, as an example of Sabry Hafez's 'new Egyptian novel' of the 1990s, this novel is characterised by, 'a narrative and linguistic fragmentation that serves to reflect an irrational, duplicitous reality'.[34] This is apparent in how the narrative shifts constantly between different characters and settings, private and public spheres, silence and speech and insanity and sanity. For example, in the chapter entitled 'The Cow Goddess Hathur', the reader is transported through a series of snapshot-like episodes, starting with Aziza remembering her first encounter with the character of Umm El-Khayr in the prison geriatric ward. Aziza then shifts to a tableau of the two of them drinking tea, triggering a flashback to Aziza's childhood. This inward turn of the narrative continues as Aziza digresses and attempts to categorise Umm El-Khayr's scent, then decides to seat Umm El-Khayr beside her on the golden chariot. Finally, the narrative shifts outward again, to Umm El-Khayr singing lullabies to the baby of one of the warders, thinking about how she protected her son by taking his place in prison. These kinds of dizzying moves through time and space and between different characters and their inner and outer worlds are common in this novel, reflecting the women's fragmented sense of self as well as how they experience time as nonlinear.

The melding of studied female colloquial patterns with the formal discourse of standard Arabic in *The Golden Chariot* is indicative of how—like many other women writers of her generation—Bakr attempts to disrupt the status quo of "traditional" writing, which can lead to representing authentic female discourse because colloquial Arabic is used in the vast majority

---

[33] Ayman Abu-Shomar, 'Diasporic Reconciliations of Politics, Love and Trauma: Susan Abulhawa's Quest for Identity in *Mornings in Jenin*', *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*; Footscray, 6.2 (2015), 127–36, p. 130.

[34] Sabry Hafez, 'The New Egyptian Novel', *New Left Review*, 64, 2010, 46–62, p. 49.

of spoken interactions or dialogues amongst Arabic speakers. Bakr's style of writing in the novel is meant to meet the standards of *fusha* while also attempting to create a feminine text by using 'the specific vocabularies, conversational styles, and modes of expression that reflect the consciousness, educational level and typical speech patterns of her female characters.[35] An example of this can be seen in the lament of Mahrousa, the warder, in reference to her traumatic past: 'You know, if anyone else had gone through what I have [...] they would have committed suicide and died an unbeliever. By God, such is their right but, thank God, my heart is as pure as the white scarf wrapped around your head, Safiyya' (p. 114). Her speech represents everyday spoken Arabic while also pointing to her working-class background, for example, through her repeated references to God, her hyperbole and the simplistic imagery.

Bakr's 'feminine' language in *The Golden Chariot* is also characterised by how she incorporates linguistic constructs to mimic the speech patterns of women in everyday life and to represent their experiences. An example of this is a story told by Umm El-Khayr, who is repeatedly referred to as a peasant woman, which builds the expectation of her use of colloquial Arabic and more simplistic language constructs. Her fabular tale reflects this with its long, convoluted and digressive sentences that are peppered with conjunctions and relative clauses and that belies her otherwise uncomplicated narrative style and simple language. For example, Umm El-Khayr tells Aziza:

> One day the rabbit asked one of his children to go out and keep watch on the path and the field and, once he was sure that the coast was clear and that there were no humans around, he should come back quickly to inform his father so that he could go with him and his brothers to the field to feed and play with them happily without fear (p. 80).

[35] Seymour-Jorn, 2002, p. 161.

Such digressive constructs can be seen to reflect the cyclical manner in which the women in this novel experience time—Bakr herself states that she uses such sentences to 'get at' the mundane aspect of women's experiences.[36]

The disorienting nature of the novel is also enhanced through Bakr's use of alternative modes of reference and description to represent women and their language by disrupting the male gaze. For example, the characters are rarely described in terms of visually pleasing physical attributes, and this is invariably linked to their femininity. This is evident with the character of Safiyya—she loses her eye as a child when trying to escape the rage and abuse of her stepfather, and this is replaced with a glass eye that, coupled with her looks, is later viewed as a blessing in disguise:

> Safiyya's glass eye was not the only natural immunity she possessed against being raped; she was extremely weak and skinny and her lack of any experience in matters feminine was extremely off-putting […] she was short, virtually flat-chested with a tiny head and a chin that looked as if it came straight out of her shoulders (p. 124).

This kind of almost ludicrous exaggeration is also employed with the character named Azimah the Giant, who is over two metres tall with a disproportionate physique: 'her lower half was extended in contrast with the short upper half and her long neck ended in a small head with big, rather bulging eyes […] she might be a giraffe in a human form'.[37] Al-Ali considers the lack of beauty a common element that characterises the women of *The Golden Chariot*, and she indicates that this is linked to their misery as they are perceived as ugly by men and hated for this ugliness, leading them to attempt to beautify themselves to please the men around them.[38] However, I would suggest that Bakr's portrayal of the commonality of the women's experiences of abuse, oppression and exploitation despite their varying degrees of physical attractiveness

---

[36] Seymour-Jorn, 2002, p.166.
[37] Bakr, 1991, p. 53.
[38] Al-Ali, 1994, pp. 59-60.

indicate the futility of attempting to conform to socially prescribed beauty standards. In the case of Azima, she is able to escape the ridicule associated with her height and appearance by making use of her true asset—her voice. She exhibits a talent as a female mourner then as a singer of traditional religious verses. These talents enable her to establish herself as a respected and beloved public figure in spite of her physical attributes. The metatextual dimensions of this and other stories in the novel indicate how women's use of voice and language are empowering by depicting nonconforming women who are nonetheless able to construct their own sense of identity and agency.

In addition to the linguistic components of Bakr's poetics, the narrative structure used in this novel, the Arabesque, can also be viewed as an important disorienting technique and form of digression. It is especially significant as it fulfils the double purpose of indicating non-linear or circular movement in time as well as allowing a story-within-a-story format. In *Charmed States and the Arabian Nights*, Marina Warner offers insight into the use of the Arabesque in *The Thousand and One Nights*, particularly with the use of a frame story of Shahrazad and the ransom tales that she serialises each night to escape execution:

> Though arabesque has not become an aesthetic term as widely understood as 'grotesque' or 'carnivalesque', a figural relationship does exist between it and the structure of the *Nights*. Endlessly generative and cyclical, arabesque embodies the vitality, resourcefulness and the dream of plenitude (no surface left bare) towards which the frame story and the ransom tales themselves are moving.[39]

Other parallels can be made between the two works; for example, much like Shahrazad, Aziza's is the frame story around which the other characters' tales are organised. Also, the nested stories in *The Golden Chariot* are serialised and broken up by the passage of time and the shift from day to night, particularly as many of Aziza's reflections and re-telling of the other inmates'

[39] Warner, 2012, p. 7.

stories take place at night. Additionally, there are glimpses of the supernatural and fantastic in *The Golden Chariot*, with references to Hathor, the goddess of fertility, for example, and with the entire premise of the golden chariot and winged horses that will carry the worthy to heaven. All of this leads to a disruption to the dualities of reality/fantasy and past/present, while also evoking a traditional storytelling format that is ideal for structuring nested stories in this text. As El-Sadda points out 'the development of the novel is not linear but cumulative: one experience is added on to another in a long series of episodes stitched together'.[40] This development follows Aziza's frame story but also digresses with each of the nested stories, before coming full circle back to Aziza at the end of the novel.

Bakr's linguistic experimentation and narrative strategies thus contribute to the polyphony of the novel, with its multiplicity of female voices that communicate experiences of trauma, while also disrupting dominant discourse and disorienting normative gender oppositions. Another consideration, however, lies in how these female voices are influenced by the space of the prison setting, especially in terms of sharing and transmitting female narratives. This, in turn, leads to a consideration of how silence manifests in this novel and what it means.

Gendered spaces can function as sites for female identity. Within the context of Arab culture, the home constitutes a normative female space, similar to the Victorian "Angel in the House", which locates women within the private sphere of the home, responsible for all domestic matters in addition to childrearing and caring for the needs of the patriarch of the family. However, Margot Badran discusses how this 'urban harem culture' is being eroded as

[40] El Sadda, 1996, p. 140.

a result of the rise of feminist consciousness and a new awareness of gender differences that has revealed to women the ways in which they are being controlled and subordinated by family-based patriarchal constructs.[41] In *The Golden Chariot*, Bakr represents this feminist consciousness by moving the narrative beyond the private, domestic sphere of the home and placing her characters within a female-only prison as the main setting. This setting allows the women to build a support system and share their trauma experiences.

Bakr's all-female prison is contrasted with the cultural model of female domestic seclusion, but her focus is not on this as a place of confinement. Rather, as Hülya Yıldız argues, *The Golden Chariot* explores the narrative possibilities of the prison space that brings together women of different social and economic backgrounds.[42] Bakr draws inspiration for her vision of the prison and its inmates from her own experience—she was arrested and imprisoned in August 1989 on charges of political conspiracy and pamphleteering.[43] In this novel, the prison is central to Aziza's frame story and acts as a springboard for the nested stories of the other characters; therefore, it can be considered a significant thematic device in the novel that plays a role in how women voice their experiences and communicate their narratives.

The prison, as a physical entity, mirrors the narrative structure of the novel. It is portrayed as a series of nested rooms and wards wherein the different characters and their backstories are revealed. This almost Borgesian structure transports the reader through the prison cell by cell as Aziza and the narrator move from one inmate to another, painting a picture of the characters and revealing their crimes and backstories. This shift is also evident in the text itself as it

---

[41] Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 3-4.
[42] Hülya Yıldız, 'Freedom in Confinement: Women's Prison Narratives and the Politics of Possibility', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 60.2 (2019), 143–56 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2018.1511517>, p. 143.
[43] Seymour-Jorn, 2002, p. 165.

consists of stories nested within other stories, not to mention in the organisation of the chapters and their unique titles that indicate movement and point to the characters' stories. Manisty discusses how 'Bakr inverts the nature of spatial confinement into a transformative space in which narration unlocks the memories of the women prisoners'.[44] As prisoners, each of the female characters exists both within and without society: they are allowed visitors such as family members, which provides the illusion of normative social relations, but their lives are governed even more closely by the power dynamics of the prison system. This almost ambiguous position allows for a measure of freedom, especially in how the prison setting facilitates the voicing of these women's stories. The inmates are now considered deviant by society and so they are more likely to flout social mores and norms by sharing their traumatic pasts.

The transformative nature of the prison setting also influences female relationships. As inmates in this correctional facility, the women are freed from the day-to-day responsibilities or routines that would normally take up most of their time, allowing them to form social bonds with other women from different backgrounds. The prison disrupts the normal linear timeframe that women would experience in "real life", something that is also reflected in the use of the Arabesque, for example—the ideal format to indicate the nonlinearity and repetitive actions experienced by women in the prison. In normative social situations, most of the women portrayed in *The Golden Chariot*, who are from the middle and lower classes, would normally be consumed with caring for a husband, raising children, cooking and cleaning and, in most cases, earning a living. They would not usually have the time or inclination to befriend other

[44] Dinah Manisty, 'Madness as Textual Strategy in the Narratives of Three Egyptian Women Writers', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 14, 1994, 152–74 <https://doi.org/10.2307/521770>, p.165.

women or allow acquaintanceships to deepen into more meaningful relationships. Therefore, the expectation would be that such women would not have a support system within their communities, which explains the importance of the "sisterhood" that is established in the prison.

Certain friendships are emphasised more than others in the novel, indicating the importance of these female bonds, especially in how it effects the voicing of the characters. For example, the close friendship between the doctor, Bahiga, and the character known as Madame Zaynab is life-changing for both women:

> Zaynab had never experienced the happiness which can come from true friendship between two women, because throughout her life men had stood in the way […] Bahiga had never experienced the intimacy she shared with Zaynab and had never felt able to confide her innermost anxieties and pain to any woman before (p. 157).

Here, two important distinctions are indicated: the interference of men in female relationships and the ability to communicate and share trauma. Internment in the all-female prison removes these characters—as well as the other women depicted in *The Golden Chariot*—from the domain of men, allowing them to truly see, hear and connect with each other. The intimacy of these female connections thus provides a sense of empathy that is conducive to communication of female experiences.

Therefore, the transformative nature of the prison is instrumental in breaking down barriers and reclaiming subjectivities for the women in the novel, which also manifests in different forms of voicing their experiences. Nadine Sinno suggests that *The Golden Chariot* allows 'a brief but real glimpse into the lives of a subaltern cross-section of society, one which we typically assume "cannot speak"'.[45] Prior to their incarceration, most of the characters

[45] Nadine Sinno, 'From Confinement to Creativity: Women's Reconfiguration of the Prison and Mental Asylum in Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* and Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 42.1 (2011), 67–94, p. 89.

experience some form of oppressive silencing, and the assumption is that the prison as a punitive institution would continue that pattern of silencing. However, characters like Aziza, Hinna and Shafiqa reveal different degrees of articulation that range from talkative, to strategically silent to fully mute, all of which are influenced by their experiences of trauma.

The Golden Chariot provides insight into the social conditioning that perpetuates a culture of silence surrounding abuse. Patti Duncan argues that the space between speech and silence can be seen as 'a site of power wherein subjectivities may be created, destroyed, or otherwise transformed'.[46] For all three women, silence is linked to their role within the dominant power dynamics as the conflict between speaking and not speaking about abuse and trauma arises from subjectification to the social hierarchy. The silencing of these three women thus signals a loss of agency that is later restored through acts of self-assertion that function to resist the dominant power structures while also preserving their sense of self. Each woman experiences a transformational moment that marks a shift in how they perceive themselves and their place in the world around them, impacting their speech and silence patterns, whether positively or negatively.

Despite her dual functionality as a character and a secondary narrator, Aziza is silent about the abuse she experienced from her stepfather and the reason why she killed him. She is conditioned to secrecy from a young age when her stepfather abruptly shifts their dynamic from (step)father/daughter to lover/mistress:

> [H]e told her, while she was still on his lap, that he loved her deeply because she was young and beautiful like one of those mermaids who only appear at night, secretly. Then he asked her to love him just as he loved her and to obey him (p. 10).

---

[46] Patti Duncan, *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2004), p. 15.

As the patriarch of the family, Aziza's stepfather is in a position of almost absolute power in the Arab family dynamic, and her obedience is expected by the man she considers 'an idol, a worshipped god' (p. 11). By enforcing secrecy, he is also silencing Aziza—albeit through his dominance and emotional manipulation—as evident by how the sexual aspects of Aziza and her stepfather's relationship (looks, sighs, kisses and caresses) are described as 'deafening in their silence' (p. 11). Aziza's subordination to her stepfather in this abusive relationship distorts her power of agency: not speaking about the abuse both while and after it happened can be seen as both a choice and enforced. As a victim of abuse, her silence is a survival mechanism that helps her preserve the illusion of the relationship as a 'love affair'. Aziza indicates or implies that the relationship is consensual, which reveals the extent of Aziza's subordination and conditioning. She plays the roles of dutiful daughter and passionate lover, befitting the translation of her name: "beloved". She interchanges the two roles so skilfully that nobody suspects anything—even Aziza's mother does not detect 'the silent cries which revealed the passionate relationship between her beloved husband and her only little girl' (p.186).

Aziza's acts of murder and the immolation of her childhood home are symbolic of her reclaiming control and asserting her own sense of agency, while also signifying a change in her silence. When her stepfather reveals he is going to remarry after the death of her mother, a fracturing of Aziza's reality takes place. She realises he is an abuser but at the same time, she deludes herself into believing he is an imposter masquerading as the 'original' man:

> She was convinced that the man she killed, that other man in his image, who violated her beautiful body before she was even thirteen, was a dangerous criminal who had stolen her loving heart and wasted the passion she poured out for the sake of her love [...] a demon in disguise who suddenly revealed himself to her, destroying her happiness (p. 8).

This break from reality allows her to kill her abuser without hesitation or remorse while also allowing her to relish the memories of the past without tainting them with the reality of the

abuse. Her reclamation of self, however, is accompanied by a form of self-destructive silence. In the harsh reality of the prison, she is 'a heap of humanity, destroyed by life and mocked by time' (p. 188), haunted by the trauma of her past but choosing not to speak about it. Although the silence her stepfather imposed on her out of fear of a scandal remains, her silence after she kills him is also strategic because she wishes to preserve the integrity of her memories. This sense of self-preservation is both a strength and a weakness. She feels untouchable because she has the sanctity of her memories, but by never speaking of the abusive relationship with her stepfather, she never truly breaks free of the trauma.

On another level, though, Aziza frees herself from social conventions of conformity by breaking her silence in other ways. She speaks her mind to others, for example, 'irrespective of whether it was true or not or whether it was appropriate. She called a spade a spade, which was precisely what people often wanted to do but held back through cowardice' (p. 184). For Aziza, the worst has already happened, and now she has earned the right to speak as she sees fit—just not about the truth of her past. In this sense, Aziza's silence seems to do her more harm than good as she does preserve those memories and emotions that mean the most to her, but at the expense of her own peace of mind and sense of self.

Hinna's sense of agency is subsumed by the pressure to conform to the dominant social norms, resulting in her initial inability to speak about her husband's abuse as she fulfils her expected role of obedient wife. Hinna's silence is, in a sense, enforced as she is conditioned to believe that all matters relating to marital intimacy, whether sexual pleasure or abuse, are taboo:

> Hinna put up with her husband's repugnant marital follies and constant harassments because she was at a loss as to what to do; moreover she was unable to speak about her problems to anyone at that time, being well aware of the first lesson of married life, that her mother had instilled in her before marriage, which was that it was not permissible, under any circumstances, to speak about what goes on in the bedroom outside its walls, even to those who were closest to you, including your mother (p. 44).

Hinna is married off to a man who turns out to have an insanely voracious sexual appetite that she is unable to match or reciprocate. Sexual relations with her husband are traumatic, resulting in physical pain and even injuries, which she is forced to endure. However, adhering to the 'first lesson of married life', Hinna never speaks of this trauma and abuse until she is incarcerated. By virtue of the socially- and culturally-prescribed authority of husband, Hinna becomes his 'mare, at his disposal day and night […] compelled to attend to the needs of her troublesome husband' (p. 40). Her needs become subordinated to his own and he exerts almost complete control over her. For example, he dictates what Hinna wears and how she styles her hair, wanting her to look like 'a tart in one of those nightclubs [...] and not like a wife from a good family or an exemplary mother' (p. 40).

This submission through social conditioning reveals how shame perpetuates the silence surrounding more conventional or direct forms of oppression. For example, in addition to the trauma and sexual objectification, catering to her husband's sexual appetites also stops Hinna from properly carrying out her culturally-prescribed domestic responsibilities (cleaning and cooking)—even her children must take second place to her husband's whims. The narrator refers to her 'embarrassment' when she is often forced to leave the food on the stove to burn or to drop the laundry to join her husband in bed. In another instance, too impatient to wait until they return home, her husband takes her to her parents' bathroom and locks the door behind them 'without the slightest feeling of shame despite the fact that his children were screaming outside […] Had her mother not been out of the house at the time Hinna would have felt deeply embarrassed' (p. 41). Bruna Seu claims that speaking about women's shame experiences

exposes them to yet more shame and so they 'withdraw into self-protective silence'.[47] Like many Arab children, Hinna has been brought up with the cultural concept of *'ayb* (shame), which can result in social condemnation or even a scandal, especially since, from a socio-religious viewpoint, a husband is entitled to sex and the matter of marital rape and abuse are considered debatable.[48] Therefore, despite being the victim of abuse, Hinna feels ashamed of what her husband does to her and how this impacts her own performance in other areas of her life, but as she cannot speak of her abuse without exposing herself, she "chooses" silence.

Hinna rebels against the social constraints that ensure her silence and her submission to her husband's abuse. Initially, she refuses to concede to her husband's demands for sex and even threatens to kill herself if he approaches her, urging him to behave decently and appropriately for his age according to cultural norms. While this seems like a powerful reclaiming of her own agency, it can be argued that the only reason that she finally stands up to her husband is because of societal/cultural assumptions that sexual intercourse is not essential for older married couples. For example, Lila Abu-Lughod explains: 'Some men argued that older couples should be like brother and sister; women thought that it was "a shame in the woman's face" [...] to have sexual relations with her husband once her children were grown'.[49] While her study centres on Bedouin tribes in Egypt, similar sentiments are also held by Egyptians in urban areas, as evident by the attitude of Hinna's sons, who 'believed that their father's intimate life with their mother had stopped a long time ago' (p. 46). This means that

---

[47] Bruna Seu, 'Shameful Silences: Self-Protective Secrets and Theoretical Omissions', in *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, ed. by Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 257–72, p. 257.

[48] See L. L. Wynn, *Love, Sex, and Desire in Modern Egypt: Navigating the Margins of Respectability* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), p. 177: The term *'ayb* is used in reference to any minor infractions against cultural norms of propriety. These infractions can be widely different, ranging from immodest clothing, rudeness, inappropriate language, and so on.

[49] Lila Abu-Lughod*, Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), p. 223.

her refusal is justified without fear of any real backlash from her husband as she is—technically—still obedient per the social norms that govern her life. However, by following through with a detailed plan to kill her husband and make it appear accidental, Hinna unequivocally asserts her agency and frees herself from his dominance. Despite this, she is still silenced by the rules of marriage and society: she resolutely adheres to an account of her husband's accidental death, refusing her lawyer's advice to plead remorse after killing a husband who had beat and tormented her in a moment of rage. This reveals that culturally prescribed rules of conduct are so deeply ingrained in Hinna that she finds even the thought of revealing private marital problems absurd, even if it might prove her innocence in court.

However, the prison setting allows Hinna to finally feel she can end the cycle of shame by breaking her silence and sharing her story. Although she still maintains her silence with her sons, her lawyer and the authorities, Hinna speaks about her abusive marriage to the other inmates:

> As matters stood, she no longer cared and nothing prevented her from narrating her story, from start to finish, to anyone who asked, because she felt no shame or embarrassment in the presence of another woman who had the same body as her, shared similar feelings to her, and was able to understand, feel and evaluate all she had suffered in her life and had been unable to express when she lived with her late husband (p. 38).

There are important caveats here: as typical social constraints no longer apply within the unique space of the prison, Hinna is no longer governed by her fear of impropriety or nonconformity when speaking about intimate sexual matters. More importantly, though, by setting these parameters for sharing her trauma, Hinna points to the support system she has found within the prison. Yıldız claims that this 'underlines the significance of female solidarity for the relief of traumatized women'.[50] Furthermore, by associating the communicative process with women

[50] Yıldız, 2019, p. 152.

and, more specifically, the female body, Bakr indicates the importance of a female mode of expression through which women's experiences and trauma can be shared.

In a way, Hinna's justification for breaking her silence to women can be seen as a form of feminist dialogism and Bakr's new language in practice. The female-only space of the prison, which is enhanced by the lack of immediate or visible patriarchal power structures, allows for the sharing of experiences that can only be understood and 'evaluated' by other women. The breaking of silence here is the next step—after murdering her husband—on the path to freeing herself from the shackles of patriarchal rule and reclaiming her agency. This is evident in the plans she makes for herself after leaving prison and which revolve around her embracing the simple joys and comforts that her husband denied her throughout their life together.

Shafiqa's silence is initially enforced through dominant patriarchal authority embodied in her father and brother. Since her silence is absolute—she does not speak a word to anybody—none of the women in the prison know her story, and only the omniscient narrator can reveal the details of her former (pre-prison) life. Shafiqa was brought up with an older sister and two brothers by an extremely strict and emotionally volatile father. He is 'a true man from the Saïd, who upheld values and traditions stretching back several thousand years […] determined to preserve the reputation of his family which he placed above any other consideration in life' (p. 166). The Saïd is a locale in Upper Egypt notorious for its people's adherence to very conservative, traditional Egyptian values and norms, especially in terms of family and gender roles. Bakr's narrator in *The Golden Chariot*, for example, explains how it is 'a male-dominated environment in which the girl is traditionally denied any real rights, is little esteemed and considered fit only for bearing children' (p. 86).

The authoritarianism of Shafiqa's father is notably directed towards the sisters, pre-emptively, 'for fear that they would run wild without a mother to watch over them' (p. 166). However, Shafiqa's sister acts as a maternal surrogate, counteracting that severity and providing an alternative power dynamic; in Shafiqa's eyes, her sister comes to represent all that is good and honourable, and she idolises her as the epitome of 'striking femininity' (p. 167). The fact that the sister's murder is engineered by Shafiqa's father and brother can be interpreted as the almost inevitable dominance of patriarchal power structures. This killing is the result of Shafiqa's sister's double-edged transgression—honour and religion—against social and cultural rules of conduct. Shafiqa is informed about her sister's fate, perhaps as a cautionary tale, and—more significantly—her brother threatens her on pain of death 'if she so much as breathed a single word on the matter to anyone' (p. 172). This is one of the most direct examples of oppressive silencing in this novel: speaking about the family's perceived shame and the subsequent murder is punishable by death.

The catalyst for Shafiqa's elective mutism and her escape from the control of her family is her sister's murder. After the murder of her sister, Shafiqa changes from the obedient daughter and sister, Taghrid, into an eccentric character known by the other prison inmates for her silence and mental instability. In the Arabic version of the novel, Shafiqa is called *al mutawawilah*, a colloquialism that roughly translates into someone who has lost their mind as a result of extreme grief. "Silent" Shafiqa is thus an interesting translation choice as it is a more accurate description because, both before and after her sister's murder, Shafiqa is never portrayed as speaking, either directly or indirectly.

The extreme trauma reaction that follows the news of her sister's murder seems to mirror that death: Shafiqa 'lay stretched out on her bed like a stiff corpse waiting to be washed, eyes

wide open, weakened by the mad burning force which rose from within her and incapable of making the smallest movement, even closing her eyelids' (p. 173). This morbid imagery can be interpreted as the metaphorical death of Shafiqa's sense of identity as the only mother she has known is cruelly taken from her by her own family members. Her subsequent physical transformation furthers this metaphor as she abandons the corpse of her old self and becomes someone new: Silent Shafiqa. Overnight, she changes into 'an oddity only a metre and a half tall and weighing just forty-five kilos', her hair turns white, and she appears to age another twenty-five years (p. 173). Her physical appearance becomes a very real reflection of her inner turmoil and bereavement as she literally shrinks from the world, and it is after this transformation that she leaves her father's house and, in the words of the narrator, 'never uttered another word' (p. 174).

Shafiqa's silence is absolute, and it becomes a studied choice after she escapes her family's autocratic rule, when it is no longer motivated by fear of the consequences of "telling". Shafiqa's silence is linked to her trauma and the 'terrible torment' from which she still suffers: 'She chose to cut herself off from the world and renounce communication with other people' (p. 164), and 'all the falsehood and evil around her which she discovered through her suffering […] made her resolve never to communicate with others' (p. 165). It is important here to point to the use of the words 'communication' and 'communicate' rather than speaking and speak: this word choice is more inclusive, pointing to how communication can encompass more than mere speech.

An important consideration about Shafiqa's elective mutism is that it is the first time she actively asserts herself after a lifetime of following the rules and choices laid down by others—men, such as her father and brother. The fact that it is associated with her physical

transformation and running away from home is also not a coincidence. Rather, Shafiqa's grief completely transforms her on more than one level: she sheds the "dead" identity of the obedient good daughter and sister, physically becoming a different person, and she uses silence as a means of preserving this newfound sense of self from the torment of the world. The question remains why Shafiqa chooses silence specifically as her form of rebellion, and one interpretation is that she understands the power of a person's voice and how words can be used as a weapon—it is the same power that her sister's jilted suitor uses to expose and shame her and that her father and brother use to kill that same sister. Shafiqa's own voice can be just as powerful because, for example, it can reveal the scandal of her sister's honour killing, but she chooses not to use it. She chooses a life of solitude, holding herself apart from the sorrows that humans inflict upon one another.

Another challenge of binary opposition in the novel lies in the portrayal of female insanity as a patriarchal social construct. Abudi summarises the claims of feminist linguists and critics such as Felman: 'within the dualistic systems of language and representation operating in Western culture, women are typically situated on the side of irrationality, silence, nature, and body, while men are situated on the side of reason, discourse, culture, and mind'.[51] This reflects traditional views that insanity in women is linked to their biology and gender (as is evident, for example, in the etymology of the word hysteria). Shifting to a non-Western perspective, Abudi provides an intriguing look at insanity in the Arab world, including the etymological background: 'the most common Arabic term for madness, *junun*, is related to genie (*jinn*) and the foetus (*janin*) because they share the quality of invisibility. Thus the term carries the

[51] Abudi, 2010, p. 222. See Felman, 1975 for more details.

undertone of vagueness or that which defies clarity'.[52] Interestingly enough, these connotations of the supernatural, the reproductive or maternal function of women and invisibility and ambiguity also align with silence within a traditional dualistic system of reference. Therefore, in novels such as *The Golden Chariot*, highlighting the characters and normalising their so-called insanity leads to the destabilising of the social construct of the enigmatic (silent) madwoman who needs to be shut away from the world—or made invisible.

In this novel, Bakr depicts different manifestations of female insanity that reflect the trauma the characters have experienced while also bringing into question the validity of the diagnosis of insanity. Badry calls *The Golden Chariot* an example of a 'deconstructionist approach to the topic of alleged madness of women' because one of the major themes in her works is to challenge 'that girls or women who resist or transgress the norms and values of society, or behave in a way that does not conform with generally undisputed standards, are frequently labelled crazy, mad, or abnormal'.[53] Throughout the novel, various characters are evaluated by doctors trying to account for their lack of conformity and/or crimes, but a formal 'diagnosis' of insanity is never made.

The diagnosis of insanity is linked to socially constructed perceptions of the inmates in question and the oppressive patriarchal system that perpetuates them. For example, the doctors who assess Aziza are impressed by her 'civilized manners and aristocratic appearance [...] proof of her high social standing' (p. 23), which leads to them forgoing a diagnosis of insanity although they are 'mystified by her condition' (p. 184). Additionally, Aziza rarely attracts attention to her madness beyond sometimes speaking aloud to herself. As another example,

---

[52] Abudi, 2010, p. 225.
[53] Badry, 2018, p. 264; p. 263.

Shafiqa presents as an extremely calm person who never quarrels with or hurts others and who is always smiling, yet her confused state of mind is evident to '[a]nyone with the slightest intelligence [...] except for her doctors, who insisted she was perfectly sane' (p. 163). In both of these cases, the women *appear* sane because they fit or conform to the normative patriarchal construct of female sanity: they are quiet, calm and unobtrusive, and furthermore, Aziza is from an apparently refined social class. This is enough for the (male) doctors to diagnosis them as sane despite any other symptoms and the crimes for which they are convicted.

Bakr's disorienting poetics is in full force here as both the reader and the characters question whether the characters are insane or not. It is clear that each of the characters in the prison has reached a breaking point in their past lives, leading to a mental breakdown that is typically accompanied by what Rasheed El-Enany refers to as 'a lashing out against society or those male individuals embodying its oppressive values'.[54] For Aziza and Hinna, this lashing out is through killing the person directly responsible for their pain and abuse while, for Shafiqa, this is achieved through abandoning her old life and transforming into a silent vagrant who exists outside of the conventions of society.

It is evident that Bakr's focus on female madness in her novel is intrinsically tied to women's voices. Manisty points out that '[s]ilencing woman's voice is the result of a broader system of discursive power which constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals'.[55] Bakr challenges the positioning or perception of silence and insanity, as evident in the narrator's comments on Shafiqa's mental state: 'isn't silence in a world raging with nonsense a sign of ultimate sanity rather than madness?' (p. 164). Rather than allowing the perception of insanity

---

[54] Rasheed El-Enany, 'The Madness of Non-Conformity: Woman versus Society in the Fiction of Salwā Bakr', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 37.3 (2006), 376–415, p. 387.
[55] Manisty, 1994, p. 167.

to act as a form of silencing, the characters take back their voices and power of agency by subverting silence to their own uses. This translates into two outcomes—in the first, the women are considered mad, so their voices are not heard or are ignored, which constitutes a form of oppressive silencing. Or, in the second outcome, the women are *not* perceived as mad, regardless of their symptoms, and so their voices are not necessarily silenced—their silence is a means of self-preservation, allowing them a sense of control over themselves in a world that denies them self-autonomy.

Aziza's madness is significant due to her dual role within the narrative, especially since her insanity is never actually confirmed or dismissed. The most telling symptom of her madness is her habit of speaking to herself, sometimes, 'in a way which was *incomprehensible to the other prisoners*' (p. 23, added emphasis). While an innocent enough explanation is provided (she spoke the few Greek words she knew), this is an indication that because Aziza is already perceived as insane, her words are not taken seriously. The other characters do not listen or pay attention to what she says and so she might as well not be speaking to begin with. Her audible conversations with herself 'never caused anxiety to anyone' (p. 184), and so Aziza is safe in her observation and judgement of the prisoners: she can speak or remain silent and, either way, she will not be heard—or if she is, she will not be understood. Aziza also imagines conversations with different characters, including her dead stepfather: 'Many a time she would chat with him during her nights, imagining sweet wine when she was only intoxicated by the memories of her life' (p. 186). This involves another important symptom: a vivid imagination that could be perceived as hallucinations. The main premise of the novel, Aziza's fantasy of the golden chariot with its flying horses that will carry her and her chosen companions to heaven, is something she truly believes is real and will take place. This is also evident in her careful observation and selection of the women she believes should accompany her. In her fantasies,

she tells them they have been chosen and she makes elaborate plans with them when, in reality, the women are aware neither of the chariot nor of her mission.

Shafiqa is also perceived as insane by the inmates of the prison although no official diagnosis is made. She is 'overcome with fits of devilish madness' (p. 175), which are believed by the inmates to be untreated epileptic fits, in addition to other symptoms, such as her refusal to remove the shift she wears, rarely bathing, barely eating, feeding her rations to stray animals and standing like a statue carved from rock for long periods of time. Her madness does not translate into violence towards others, but rather, seems to turn inward as she neglects her self-care and wellbeing. El-Enany makes an interesting point about the double-edged metaphor of madness in Bakr's works—he claims that its function is mutually convenient for both the oppressed and oppressor: 'for the oppressed it is simultaneously a means of escape and of self-assertion […] insomuch as it is a final rejection of the unjust norms of society, a counter disclaimer, a rejection of society's "irrational" sanity'[56]. Shafiqa's silence is perhaps perceived as a symptom of her madness, but Shafiqa is described as completely aware of the world around her and intentionally silent, which can also point to her sanity and the way that she obviously challenges societal injustice.

The Golden Chariot seamlessly blends narrative structure and linguistic experimentation in a polyphonic novel that privileges the voices of disadvantaged women. The themes of this work revolve around the plight of women in Egypt who have faced lack of education, straitened socio-economic circumstances and systematic abuse and violence, resulting in traumatic responses that have led to their incarceration. The novel depicts how the prison provides a space that facilitates the sharing of testimonies and narratives, establishing a community and support

[56] El-Enany, 2006, p. 381.

system of women who understand and empathise with the trauma of their sisters-in-suffering. This depiction is further enhanced by Bakr's stylistic strategies—her poetics of disorientation and new language—which challenge normative gendered binaries and highlight how women communicate, especially in terms of voicing their experiences to other women. Silence is part of that mode of communication in that it allows women like Aziza, Hinna and Shafiqa to preserve a sense of self and agency, despite the possible negative ramifications of such a silence. It differs from the oppressive silencing they have experienced throughout their lives from patriarchal power dynamics in that it is a choice they make for themselves and, whether they choose to break that silence or not, it is a means of protecting themselves from the pain and suffering they have come to expect from the world.

Chapter Three

A Voice from Hell: Silence and Resistance in *Woman at Point Zero*

The previous chapter explored how women use silence as a form of self-preservation after experiencing trauma through an analysis of *The Golden Chariot*. In this novel, Salwa Bakr crafts a tale within the walls of a prison, displaying a gallery of criminalised women who have formed an unlikely community within this paradoxically liberating space. *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi is another novel written by an Egyptian woman that draws parallels with *The Golden Chariot*. Written in 1975 and translated into English in 1983, the novel was initially banned from publication due to its, 'extensive and condemnatory portrayal of the forms of sexual abuse suffered by women within the home, the family and patriarchal Egyptian society at large'.[1] El Saadawi concentrates on the sexual exploitation and degradation of women through the main character, Firdaus, highlighting, 'the way the political, economic, social, religious, and cultural factors that promote male domination and female oppression intersect'.[2]

Woman at Point Zero is a text that, in many ways, is difficult to categorise. In her foreword to the novel, miriam cooke calls it 'creative non-fiction', and it seems to straddle the line between fiction and autobiography, without fully being either.[3] The novel is about a prostitute named Firdaus, who is in prison for killing her pimp, and it opens with an anonymous female psychiatrist's first-person narration of the circumstances surrounding how she came to meet with this prisoner and her impressions when first meeting her. Firdaus, in turn, takes on

---

[1] Ball, 2009, p. 71.
[2] Badry, 2018, p. 276.
[3] miriam cooke, 'Foreword', in *Woman at Point Zero*, by Nawal El Saadawi, trans. by Sherif Hetata, (London: Zed Books, 1983), p. vii.

the role of a narrator to reveal her past and what has led her to this point zero, where she is awaiting execution for her crime. The closing narrative reverts to the doctor reflecting on Firdaus's tale after the latter is led away to her death. This novel is about moving beyond passivity and fear and discovering the truth about female power. This power is most evident in Firdaus's voice, which is amplified and broadcast to others through the act of narrating/writing.

In this chapter, I will consider one of the most intriguing aspects of this novel, the narrative structure. I will show how the power of Firdaus's narrative means that *Woman at Point Zero* can be placed within different critical frameworks that nonetheless overlap, namely, testimony narrative, resistance literature and scriptotherapy. Additionally, the opening framing narrative is instrumental in revealing much about the characters and the complex power dynamics, in addition to how the initial narrator and other characters project their own anxieties and feelings onto Firdaus. I will then explore how Firdaus's upbringing and early experiences condition her to remain silent, submissive and passive. The trauma of her childhood—namely, abuse and an enforced clitoridectomy—teach Firdaus that she does not have bodily autonomy. This leads to the positioning of her body as a source of value that can be exploited by others, especially men.

Another important consideration in the analysis of female voices in this novel is the relationship between Firdaus's body, her sense of agency and her silence. Building on the insights of critics such as Eustace Palmer, Roswitha Badry and Anna Ball, I will show how oppressive gender roles and patriarchal power lead to the exploitation of women's bodies and produce transactional relationships in which women such as Firdaus are placed in silenced, subordinate positions, with their bodies becoming a form of currency. I will then explore how —as an alternative to voice—vision, especially the novel's striking colour symbolism and

recurrent motifs of eyes, reflect both Firdaus's state of mind and how she perceives the world around her. Furthermore, I will show how knives and related imagery symbolise the violation of Firdaus's body and later become the means by which she exacts her revenge.

Finally, I will examine how the act of female narration or storytelling allows women to express their trauma in their own words. This novel reveals a stark view of how women are exploited, marginalised and silenced by the patriarchy, but it also shows how women like Firdaus can resist the dominant narrative through speaking/writing their own experiences in their own voices. Imprisoned for the ultimate challenge to male authority, androcide, Firdaus uses the only weapon at her disposal, her voice, to fight back.[4] She does this by choosing when to speak and when to hold her silence. By controlling the circumstances of breaking her silence, she retains some form of control over her body/narrative and ensures her voice is heard on her own terms. As Firdaus verbally navigates the hardships and turning points of her life, she reveals her personal development as she gradually moves from silenced oppression and passivity to the point where she realises the truth and acts upon it.

At its simplest level, *Woman at Point Zero* is essentially a story about two women having a conversation. The novel is narrated entirely from the first-person point of view and its nested story format plays an important role in how the female characters—and, by extension, their voices—are perceived. There are two female storytellers, an unnamed doctor and Firdaus. The

[4] See Catherine Addison, 'Radical Feminism and Androcide in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*', *English Studies in Africa*, 63.2 (2020), 1–13 https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2020.1852683: She defines androcide as, '[t]he murder of men as men' (p. 6, author's emphasis), suggesting it is a less recognised form of action than femicide—or the, 'killing of women as women' (p. 6, author's emphasis). She also makes the argument that El Saadawi stands out as one of the few Arab/African feminists who openly suggests this as, 'an antidote, deterrent or punishment for patriarchy' (p. 6). It could be argued, however, that Firdaus's imprisonment and her subsequent execution indicate that this antidote is not actively endorsed by the author.

former's narrative sets the scene, so to speak, by introducing Firdaus and placing her within the context of the prison. It acts as the frame story, as the very short opening and closing chapters in this three-chapter novel, while Firdaus's nested account of her life, which takes up the long second chapter, can be considered a metanarrative as she is both a character in the doctor's story (the first level of narration) and the narrator of her own story.[5] While this format evokes the traditional structure of *The Thousand and One Nights*, it also exemplifies how the act of female narration or storytelling allows women to express their trauma in their own words.

Woman at Point Zero reveals a stark view of how women are exploited and marginalised by patriarchy to the point where they lose their hopes and desires, but it also shows how women can resist the dominant narrative through speaking/writing their own experiences in their own voices. Al-Ali indicates how El Saadawi's works are characterised by the verbal empowerment of women,[6] and this has perhaps contributed to the categorisation of this novel as testimonial literature, trauma narrative and scriptotherapy by different critics. *Woman at Point Zero* exhibits characteristics from each that overlap without diminishing from the works' overall message. Felman defines the process of testimony as 'bearing witness to a crisis or a trauma', questioning how the act of writing is tied to this act of bearing witness.[7] Laub explains that testimonies are not monologues and that they cannot take place in solitude.[8] She also discusses the role of the listener:

> The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. By extension, the listener to

[5] The levels of narration as explained by John Pier are described in more detail in Chapter 2.
[6] Al-Ali, 1994, p. 35.
[7] Shoshana Felman, 'Education and Crisis or the Vicissitudes of Teaching', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1–56, p.1.
[8] Laub, 1991, pp. 57–74, p. 70-71.

> trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself.[9]

Thus, as an example of testimonial narrative, we find that the format of *Woman at Point Zero* aligns with this—the doctor as the listener to Firdaus's narrative is bearing witness to the latter's trauma and, as a narrator, contributes to the transmission of this testimony. Furthermore, Chitra Thampy makes the argument for *Woman at Point Zero* as an example of scriptotherapy, a term she explains is coined by Suzette A. Henke to refer to 'a space where the writer explores his/her writing for therapeutic purposes'.[10] Thampy claims that writing trauma allowed El Saadawi to 'voice that which cannot be uttered', helping her to recover from the trauma she herself experienced at the hands of the Egyptian government, whether in the form of persecution or imprisonment.[11] However, this form of catharsis can also be applied to the character of Firdaus—by narrating her trauma to the doctor, she is, in a way, exploring her life and unburdening herself. As Firdaus verbally navigates the hardships and turning points of her life, she also reveals her personal development as she gradually moves from silenced oppression and passivity to the point where she realises the truth and acts upon it.

The nested story format of this novel highlights the ambiguity of the relationships between the main characters/narrators and how they use their voices, especially when considering the complexity of this first chapter. Four characters make an appearance here: an unnamed female doctor and the initial narrator, a male prison doctor, a female prison warder, and Firdaus. The centring of the first three characters around Firdaus sets her apart while also revealing the multivocality and the complex interconnectedness of voices in this novel.

---

[9] Laub, 1991, p. 57.
[10] Chitra Susan Thampy, 'Nawal El Saadawi: Attaining Catharsis through Trauma Narration in *Woman at Point Zero*', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22.6 (2021), 36–42, p. 41.
[11] Thampy, 2021, p. 41.

The character of the female doctor, in particular, is significant, not least owing to her complicated reaction to Firdaus. She is studying the inmates of a women's prison and, after hearing about a silent prisoner, becomes obsessed with meeting and hearing the story of the enigmatic Firdaus. The doctor first hears about this prisoner from the prison doctor and the warder, and it is through them that she attempts to make contact with Firdaus, who repeatedly refuses to meet her. Finally, on the eve of her execution, Firdaus agrees to an interview, narrating her life story and revealing the truth that leads her to no longer fear death. The doctor's short narrative underlies her importance in the text, especially as she is perhaps the most ambiguous character in *Woman at Point Zero*. One of the main reasons is that she remains unnamed throughout the novel, which brings into question her identity and thus the validity of her voice/narrative. This character is addressed as 'Doctor' by the other characters, and this is how she labels herself, talking about, 'my identity, my self-esteem as a doctor'.[12] She seems somewhat self-regarding and snobbish, believing that her profession elevates her position in the social hierarchy, reflecting: 'a doctor was surely to be preferred to a woman condemned to death for murder' (p. 5). While she repeatedly refers to her profession, she also exhibits clear signs of bias when it comes to Firdaus, even admitting: 'Subjective feelings such as those that had taken hold of me were not worthy of a researcher in science' (p. 5). This professional yet subjective stance influences how she portrays Firdaus to the reader. Another point of ambiguity lies in the clear parallel between this character and the author. In her preface to the novel, El Saadawi reveals that she met and interviewed a real woman named Firdaus while researching mental afflictions in female inmates. The doctor's narrative echoes El Saadawi's words, both in terms of the circumstances of the meeting and in how both emphasise Firdaus as a real woman

[12] Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, trans. by Sherif Hetata (London: Zed Books, 1983), p. 4. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

and focus on the power of her voice.[13] Addressing this, Barbara Harlow claims that El Saadawi's 'authorial distance' is recast in this novel, a work that 'merges the requirements of fiction and narrative form with the historical and sociological demands of biography'.[14] Therefore, we can see that the doctor's narrative, while not strictly autobiographical, still acts as an extension of El Saadawi's authorial voice. Does this initial narrator then, the doctor, represent El Saadawi herself? This question of representation is significant, in particular, when considering whether this text functions as social commentary.

The impact of the author's voice is therefore doubly significant when analysing the polyphony of this novel. El Saadawi, a physician, activist and prolific writer, was a well-known and controversial literary figure in both the Arab world and the West. She has been dubbed a radical feminist[15] and, 'the de Beauvoir of the Arab world'[16] as a result of her writings on medicine, gender, politics, culture and religion. Furthermore, Moore claims she is, 'the best-known expositor of Arab Muslim female experience to Western audiences since the 1980 translation of [her novel] *The Hidden Face of Eve*'.[17] The controversy surrounding El Saadawi is largely because she does not shy away from speaking or writing about social, cultural or religious taboos, and especially the sexual abuse and oppression of women. As Malti-Douglas states, 'no Arab woman's pen has violated as many sacred enclosures as that of Nawal El

---

[13] See Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (University of California Press, 1995): Malti-Douglas makes the argument that, although this novel calls attention to the problem between fiction and biography, El Saadawi herself refers to *Woman at Point Zero* as a novel and, if this were a purely biographical work, El Saadawi would have included Firdaus's case as part of her medical writings. See Peter Hitchcock, *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 34: He states that Firdaus's case was not included in El Saadawi's previous book on her investigations in the prison because, as she writes in her preface to the novel, 'Firdaus […] remained a woman apart. She stood out amongst the others' (El Saadawi, p. xi).

[14] Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 137.

[15] Malti-Douglas, 1995.

[16] Rosemary Sayigh, 'Roles and Functions of Arab Women: A Reappraisal', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 3.3 (1981), 258–74, p. 235.

[17] Moore, 2008, p. 17.

Saadawi'.[18] In fact, her feminist critique is considered instrumental for popularising discourses about women's rights and sexuality in the Arab world.[19]

Nonetheless, despite their popularity, El Saadawi's works have received criticism from her Arab counterparts and critics in the West. One of the main issues has been that many consider her fictional work does not represent Arab women's creative writing.[20] She is also perceived as anticipating a Western readership in her novels. Sabry Hafez, for example, claims: 'I detect in her writing, in Arabic, that she is more interested in the Western than in the Arab reader'.[21] This seems ironic since she and many other Arab cultural critics believe that the solution to the ills of Arab society partly lies in the rejection of Western paradigms, perspectives and scholarship.[22] Additionally, she has been accused of writing one-dimensional characters that do not represent complex human relations by critics such as Hafez and Georges Tarabishi.[23]

Despite this controversy—or perhaps because of it—El Saadawi's works continue to be classed by Western scholars as powerful examples of Arab feminist writing. In contradistinction to Western constructs of feminism, Arab feminism is born from 'the double struggle: internally against the old religious, social and economic order; and externally against European colonisation', which alludes to the tension between feminism as an imported Western construct

---

[18] Malti-Douglas, 1995.
[19] Amireh, 2000, p. 231.
[20] Amal Amireh, 'Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers', *Al Jadid*, 2.10 (1996).
[21] Sabry Hafez, 'Intentions and Realisation in the Narratives of Nawal El-Saadawi', *Third World Quarterly*, 11.3 (1989), 188–98, p. 189.
[22] Amireh, 2000, p. 230.
[23] Hafez, 1995, p. 34. See Georges Tarabishi, *Woman Against Her Sex: A Critique of Nawal El-Saadawi* (London: Saqi Books, 1988) for a psychoanalytical critique of El Saadawi's works. It has received criticism from Western critics in particular—for instance, Hitchcock laments the fact that 'the first book-length work on Nawal el Saadawi available in English happens to be an extended antifeminist diatribe by a Freudian' (1992, p. 207). However, Amireh disputes this, making the argument that this work is not opposed to El Saadawi and raises worthwhile questions about her fiction and feminist fiction in general (2000, p. 240).

and as an indigenous movement in a postcolonial Arab world.[24] Often, the multiplicity or plurality of female identity in the Arab world is disregarded in Western feminist perspectives. Lazreg notes how individual Third World women are considered representatives of countless women in their own societies.[25] This is mainly because the application of Western concepts of feminism to the Arab world tends to underestimate the region's plethora of different geographical locations, dialects, religions, traditions, socio-economic circumstances and political structures.

El Saadawi helps further the agenda of Arab feminism through her fiction by giving voices to marginalised women. Rather than placing texts like *Woman at Point Zero* within the framework of Western constructs of feminism, critics like Peter Hitchcock make the case for considering El Saadawi's works as 'productive in problematizing the ideological apparatuses of cultural normalization or assimilation, in ways [that] contribute to a disabling of that hegemony'. [26] From a wider scope, Hitchcock examines how cultural positioning of marginalised or subaltern groups influences the articulation or voicing of inequality, explaining that dialogism can 'articulate cultural exchange in ways that circumvent the by now obvious pitfalls of West/East dichotomies'.[27] This would mean that the portrayal of a woman like Firdaus, who is depicted at once as both unique and commonplace and who uses her voice to speak her story, allows for the deconstruction of what he dubs 'cultural normalization'. Part of this deconstruction or disabling lies in El Saadawi's strategic depiction of female voices. This is most evident in *Woman at Point Zero* through the double-voicing strategy of the doctor as a

[24] Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, 'Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?', *Third World Quarterly*, 25.3 (2004), 521–36, p. 529.
[25] Lazreg, 1994, p. 10.
[26] Hitchcock, 1992, p. 27.
[27] Hitchcock, 1992, p. 29.

narrator/author, combined with the nested first-person narrative voice of Firdaus and the embedded voices of characters such as the prison warder, prison doctor and the various men and women in Firdaus's story. This polyphony/dialogism depicts alternate viewpoints that challenge the single reality of Westernised feminist perspectives.

An important consideration regarding the characterisation of Firdaus is how she is perceived by and seems to mirror other characters, especially women who are cognizant of her strength, who see their fears and weaknesses reflected back to them. A prime example of this is the doctor. She is an authority figure here, due to her profession, the endorsement of both the prison doctor and prison warder and her ambiguous link to El Saadawi's authorial voice. However, she has no real authority over Firdaus, as is apparent when the latter repeatedly refuses the doctor's requests to meet with her. The doctor cannot force Firdaus to speak due to her 'complete indifference to everything, her attitude of total rejection' (p. 4). This rejection engenders a feeling of helplessness in the doctor and a loss of confidence as she starts to question her self-worth: 'Compared to her [Firdaus], I was nothing but a small insect crawling upon the land amidst millions of other insects' (p. 3) and 'Since she had rejected me, did that mean she was a better person than me?' (p. 4). Through simply existing and not speaking, Firdaus has power—in this case, to reflect or amplify the doctor's insecurities and fears of inadequacy. She reacts to Firdaus's rejection as a scorned lover, obsessing and losing sleep. In fact, she states outright that this rejection reminds her of when she fell in love with a man who did not reciprocate her feelings: 'I felt rejected, not only by him, not only by one person amongst the millions that peopled the vast world, but by every living being or thing on earth, by the vast world itself' (p. 5).

The doctor's reaction to Firdaus and her refusal to meet her seems disproportionate and almost apocalyptic. For example, she states: 'I felt somehow that my research was now in jeopardy. As a matter of fact, my whole life seemed to be threatened with failure' (p. 3). In a way, Firdaus becomes the single most important entity in both the doctor's professional and personal life from the moment she hears about her. Even though she has not yet met her at this point in the novel, the doctor forms such a strong personal attachment to Firdaus that the doctor's identity is subsumed and it requires an effort to root herself in reality once again: for example, the physically grounding act of opening her car door when she leaves the prison helps her to restore her identity and self-esteem as a doctor. When Firdaus finally agrees to meet with her, the doctor is filled with euphoria: 'I held the whole world in my hands […] It was a feeling I had known only once before, many years ago. I was on my way to meet the first man I loved for the first time' (p. 6). This reinforces the idea that her relationship with Firdaus extends beyond that of mere doctor and patient or listener and speaker. Ramzi Saiti and Ramzi S. Salti note that the analogy eroticises the relationship between the doctor and Firdaus, with the former becoming dependent on Firdaus for self-validation, which establishes Firdaus's authority.[28] Similarly, Omar Abdullah *et al.* refer to latent bisexual subtext in *Woman at Point Zero*, and they argue that same-sex discourse such as that between the doctor and Firdaus could be 'a means to liberate the self from patriarchal power constraints'.[29] Regardless of any sexual connotations, it is clear that Firdaus is the dominant component in this dynamic. She decides how the relationship progresses and, unknowingly, reflects the doctor's perception of herself.

---

[28] Ramzi Saiti and Ramzi M. Salti, 'Paradise, Heaven, and Other Oppressive Spaces: A Critical Examination of the Life and Works of Nawal El-Saadawi', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 25.2 (1994), 152–74, p. 155.

[29] Omar Mohammed Abdullah and others, 'Manifestations of Hysteria in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*', *3L, Language, Linguistics, Literature*; Selangor, 21.3 (2015), p. 86.

This kind of mirroring or projection can also be seen with the prison warder. She is oddly protective of Firdaus, especially in the face of the doctor's determination to meet her, saying, 'What use are you, or anybody else to her? Leave her alone!' (p. 2). Despite Firdaus's criminality, there is an obvious empathy that perhaps stems from the warder's perception of Firdaus as someone who is beyond help and who has been forsaken by others, especially those in authority. She is enraged by Firdaus's impending execution: 'Murderer or not, she's an innocent woman and does not deserve to be hanged. They are the ones that ought to hang' (p. 3). In fact, she is the first character to refer to 'they' and 'them', the mysterious faceless system that is in power. She questions why the doctor wants to speak with Firdaus, angrily and fearfully accusing her of being sent by 'them', which could indicate her own traumatic past experiences with male authority figures. She is the go-between for the doctor and Firdaus, supposedly trying to arrange a meeting and relaying Firdaus's responses. The doctor asks the warder whether Firdaus knows her, to which she replies: 'No, *she did not tell me anything* [...] But she does know you […] I can sense her' (p. 4, added emphasis). This reveals that Firdaus, true to form, does not speak to the warder and so this 'sense' is clearly the warder's own. She has taken empathy that extra step further and is speaking *for* Firdaus and, in the process, projecting her own self onto Firdaus.

This projection of self is important because it reveals how the warder appropriates or hijacks Firdaus's voice; what does Firdaus's silence mean if the warder is speaking/interpreting for her? Additionally, it is the warder who informs the doctor when Firdaus finally agrees to a meeting, and her reaction seems as out of proportion as the doctor's obsession. We learn:

> Her [the warder's] gasping voice reminded me of the voices I often heard in my dreams...Her breast was heaving up and down, her breathing had become a series of gasps, and her eyes and face reflected a violent emotion. If the President of the Republic in person had asked to see me, she could not have been swept by such an overpowering emotion (p. 6).

This description highlights the significance of voice in this novel, especially Firdaus's, which the warder and the doctor are both projecting or transmitting. (The dream-like quality of voices will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.) This is also the second time that Firdaus has been paralleled with the head of the state, which emphasises her importance and positions her in a place of power in relation to those around her. The warder's violent reaction to the news reveals just how invested she is in the relationship with Firdaus. In fact, both the doctor and the warder seem to connect to Firdaus on a visceral level although it is nonreciprocal. They are both cognizant of Firdaus's power, whether they observe her from a position of obsession or empathy.

It is not only the female characters in the first chapter that project their own selves or desires onto Firdaus. The prison doctor is the first character who speaks of Firdaus and his portrayal and perception of her is just as significant as the lengthier interactions of the female doctor in this part of the novel. This character fully captures the doctor's attention when he describes Firdaus: 'You will never meet anyone like her in or out of prison. She refuses all visitors, and won't speak to anyone' (p. 1). He places emphasis on Firdaus's silence, seeming perplexed by her refusal to speak to him about her past. He exhibits classic signs of a male hero or saviour complex. Unprompted, he takes it upon himself to compose an appeal to the President on her behalf and then cannot understand why she does not agree to sign it. He tells the female doctor, 'I do not really feel she is a murderer. If you look into her face, her eyes, you will never believe that so gentle a woman can commit murder' (p. 2). He envisions himself as a knight in shining armour, projecting onto Firdaus the role of the damsel in distress whom he must help due to her gentleness—a trait that translates into helplessness. The viewpoint that he projects on Firdaus as a gentle woman incapable of murder seems to align with normative male/female

dichotomies, positioning her as weak and someone he must save—even if it is from herself.[30] The female doctor draws his attention to the fallacy in his reasoning, but, although it makes him feel uncomfortable, he does not appear to reconsider his stance.

Ironically, in the second chapter, Firdaus refers to the prison doctor as 'one of them' (p. 110), revealing another version of these events. Most damning are his words to her when she refuses to sign the appeal because she does not feel any remorse for the murder: 'You criminal. You deserve to die' (p. 111). This is in direct contradiction to his self-proclaimed belief in her innocence—the female doctor's narrative and Firdaus's thus reveal two different perspectives of the same character. El Saadawi strategically uses both voices to attack the male ego, and this is just one example of fragile masculinity in the novel. In Firdaus's version of the truth, the prison doctor rejects her moral standpoint and harshly judges her. However, when he relates his version to the female doctor, he becomes the injured party who is puzzled by Firdaus's silence and her rejection of his so-called help because he expects her gratitude and submission or acquiescence. When his letter of appeal does not illicit these reactions, he refers her to the female doctor as an oddity, omitting his own real reaction to her and painting himself in a more positive light.

Thus, El Saadawi's use of multiple narrators plays a significant role in highlighting the complex power dynamic between characters, and the narrative structure of this first chapter in particular positions Firdaus as a powerful entity in her own right. She plays the dominant role in each of the relationships that she unwittingly has with the three characters despite not even

[30] Ironically, the first man Firdaus confesses her crime to has the same reaction: 'I can't believe that someone like you can kill [...] Because you are too gentle [...] I cannot believe that you are capable of killing anything, even a mosquito' (p. 108). His repeated denial is almost comic, especially when Firdaus eventually slaps him to prove her point that stabbing a man is just as easy to her as slapping one, even requiring the same movement of the arm and hand.

appearing until the final page and a half of the chapter. This is an important strategy that ensures Firdaus's voice is not only heard but is also later transmitted and amplified through the female doctor. Firdaus's power and voice are emphasised in both El Saadawi's preface, the doctor's narrative and how the characters project onto her so that, by the time Firdaus actually starts to speak, the reader's interest has already been piqued and they are aware that what she has to say is important.

Firdaus first speaks at the end of the first chapter before taking over the role of narrator in the second. In a reversal of typical hierarchal roles, Firdaus holds all of the power in her relationship with the doctor, which is apparent in how she addresses the doctor only in the form of commands: 'Close the window […] Sit down on the ground' (p. 7), and then when she starts her story, the most important words of all: 'Let me speak. Do not interrupt me' (p. 9). This is a very forceful opening address, especially considering Firdaus's initial refusal to speak about her past. Interestingly, Malti-Douglas makes the point that many of El Saadawi's female narrators are only able to control discourse and utter words through the intervention of a female physician as is evident in *Woman at Point Zero* with Firdaus choosing to break her silence to the doctor.[31] However, I would argue that Firdaus is not dependent on the doctor, but rather chooses her as the recipient of her story as a result of her impending execution. Firdaus's dominance in the relationship, coupled with the doctor's almost sycophantic obsession, and Firdaus's contemplative articulation of her experiences and hard truths show that she controls the narrative and does not need any intervention. Fivush argues that 'silence can lead to power through providing the space for the creation of narratives of resistance and healing'.[32] Firdaus's

[31] Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 10.
[32] Fivush, 2010, p. 89.

silence is a strategy for resisting 'their' narrative, but it also provides a reflective space that allows her to find a way to communicate her story to and through the doctor, leaving behind a legacy of words that will outlive her.

Firdaus is not shy about her humble beginnings, especially when revealing the traumatic experiences that shaped her from a young age. The most brutal and detrimental of these is the clitoridectomy that she is forced to undergo. Having undergone this medically unnecessary and invasive procedure herself as a child, El Saadawi is obviously writing from a place of experience, making this portrayal all the more haunting. El Saadawi started her political activism and writing while practising medicine, but the end of her medical career came after publishing her 'analysis and condemnation of the injustices Egyptian women suffer, notably excision. [Her] scholarly exposition of the failure of the state to provide medical services to its most needy citizens caused a scandal'.[33] Her own experience of female genital mutilation features in her book, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, and El Saadawi campaigned for the outlawing of this practice both in fiction and nonfiction until it was banned in 2008.[34] El Saadawi was also critical of the interest of Western feminists who 'sensationalise' the 'marginal' topic of female genital mutilation and use female circumcision to 'emphasize differences between first-world and third-world women'.[35] Rather, El Saadawi insists that 'similarity should be underscored'

---

[33] miriam cooke, 'Nawal El Saadawi: Writer and Revolutionary', in *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory*, ed. by Robin Truth Goodman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 214–29 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316422007.016>, p. 216.
[34] cooke, 2015, p. 223.
[35] Amireh, 2000, p. 220.

and declares that 'all women are circumcised, if not physically then, "psychologically and educationally"'.[36]

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus is born to a peasant family in a small village that is marked by a hypocritical patriarchal class system and its casual violence towards its womenfolk. She is constantly aware of the men in her community, finding that they are so alike to her eyes that she sometimes cannot distinguish her father from the rest. (This interchangeability of men is a key feature of Firdaus's narrative and will be discussed in more detail later.) Firdaus pointedly asks her mother about her father: 'How was it that she had given birth to me without a father?' (p. 12). This question sparks something within the mother that leads to swift and extreme punishment—Eustace Palmer suggests that Firdaus 'seems to be developing an interest in sexuality and [the mother] decides that this precociousness must be curbed'.[37] Another interpretation could be that Firdaus is questioning her mother's 'honour' by casting doubt on who fathered her. Whatever the case, for voicing her thoughts, Firdaus's mother first beats her, then brings a woman to circumcise her. Firdaus's description of this mutilation is detached and almost clinical: 'They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs' (p. 12). Abdullah *et al.* link this to 'Lacanian castration', explaining that the loss of her identity 'stems from this bodily excision which causes real mental and physical trauma. This disconnection between body and psyche, this psychophysical disorientation and hysterical anesthesia [*sic*], all result from alienation and loss of control over her body'.[38] On another level, Susan Arndt considers Firdaus' genital circumcision to symbolise the fact that 'she has always been deprived of all right to self-

[36] Amireh, 2000, p. 220.
[37] Eustace Palmer, 'Nawal El Saadawi and the Female Predicament: A Study of *Woman at Point Zero*', *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 7.2 (2013), 88–114 <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2013.11690209>, p. 92.
[38] Abdullah et al., 2015b, p. 102.

determination and happiness'.[39] Hence, the clitoridectomy is a turning point for Firdaus, emphasising her lack of bodily autonomy and causing a sense of disconnectedness between self and body as a result of an absence that haunts her throughout her subsequent sexual activities. After this cutting, Firdaus no longer dares to ask the questions that itch in her mind—her silencing is so cruelly effective that it takes her years to break free.

Firdaus' first two sexual encounters before and after the mutilation of her body influence her perception of sex and her relationships with men throughout her life. Prior to the clitoridectomy, Firdaus would play in the fields and stream with her little friend, Mohammadain, a sexually explorative game of 'bride and bridegroom', which would bring a 'sensation of sharp pleasure' (p. 12). However, after the procedure, her mother unwittingly puts an end to this as she now expects Firdaus to stay at home and do so-called women's work: gathering water, sweeping dung from under the animals, kneading dough and baking bread. This marks the beginning of womanhood for her and the beginning of her uncle's sexual abuse. Firdaus describes it almost negligently, saying: 'whenever everything around us lapsed into silence […] his hand would continue to press against my thigh with a grasping, almost brutal insistence' (p. 13). In both her description of Mohammadain and her uncle, Firdaus does not seem to be aware of the sexual nature of what is being done to her or perhaps the incidents have continued for so long at this point that they have become a commonplace occurrence. Abdullah *et al.* view both the actions of Mohammadain and her uncle as sexual molestation, classing these as 'hysteria causing' events.[40] On the other hand, Palmer differentiates between the two, claiming that her sexual encounters with Mohammadain are presented as innocent, 'emphasized by the fact that

[39] Palmer, 2013, p. 92.
[40] Abdullah et al., 2015b, p. 103.

the sexual awakening and pleasure the girl derives from it would never be repeated in all the encounters she is later to have with other men'.[41] I agree with Palmer's interpretation as Firdaus's games with Mohammadain awaken her to sexual pleasure and her subsequent sexual experimentations and encounters attempt to recapture and relive those sensations. However, the genital mutilation she undergoes almost immediately afterwards catapults her into a womanhood that is marked by absence: 'I no longer felt the strong sensation of pleasure that radiated from an unknown yet unfamiliar part of my body [...] as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return' (p. 13). Palmer argues that circumcision, 'means deprivation […] not only deprivation of the companionship she used to have with Mohammadain, but of sexual pleasure'.[42] This loss of companionship/pleasure appears in all of her later relationships with men, with a clear disconnect between the emotional and the physical or sexual.

The small knife that is used to cut away that essential part of Firdaus is part of a recurring motif of knives and cutting that is also prominent in the initial description of Firdaus in the first chapter. The doctor falls under the spell of Firdaus's powerful presence, claiming '[i]t was as though I died the moment her eyes looked into mine' (p. 7). She states that these 'were eyes that killed, like a knife, cutting deep down inside, their look steady, unwavering' (p. 7). Just as the knife that was used against her as a child, Firdaus's eyes are also able to cut down the very essence of a person. Firdaus's voice is also 'steady, cutting deep down inside, cold as a knife' (p. 7). These analogies serve as a reminder that this is a dangerous and violent woman, a murderess who, when describing her crime near the end of the novel, states: 'I stuck the knife

[41] Palmer, 2013, p. 96.
[42] Palmer, 2013, p. 92.

into almost every part of his body' (p. 104). Critics such as Hitchcock describe this act as a 'counterpenetration' and Malti-Douglas a 'reverse sexual penetration', an enactment of the many rapes that she endured throughout her life.[43] Additionally, keeping in mind the phallic symbolism of the knife, Firdaus's subverting of the "male instrument" indicates a reversal of roles, with her eclipsing male authority—a reversal that also extends to the power dynamics between her and the doctor. Thus, despite the latter's profession, Firdaus is positioned as her superior not because she murdered a man, but because she disarmed him and used his own weapon against him both figuratively and literally, effectively usurping men in the social hierarchy and establishing herself in their place. By describing her voice in particular as knife-like, the doctor is invoking that power and dominance, in addition to literally weaponizing Firdaus's voice. It is the tool that Firdaus uses to reveal all that she has experienced and to cut down to the truth that she has discovered: that she can fight back against 'them', all the men who hold power and who exploit her and other women without any fear of retribution.

The aftershocks of the cutting of Firdaus's body are most pronounced in how this experience shapes her understanding of gender roles in her society. Through her observations of family life, she builds her own conception of how men and women act towards each other, and this is the blueprint that she follows even after the deaths of her parents.

After the short yet powerful first chapter of *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus starts her narrative or monologue by revealing important details that show the fundamentals of her personality and lay the foundation for the thematic content of the novel. She articulates her

[43] Hitchcock, 1992, p. 45; Malti-Douglas, 1995.

drive for self-improvement and self-fulfilment at the beginning of her story: 'All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rulers' (p. 9). Rather than pursue happiness or love, she desires to move beyond the limited role afforded to her as a woman, a role that is dictated by the social norms and gendered hierarchies that effectively cage and imprison her. By her reference to powerful male political ranks, she hints at her discontent with stereotypical female roles while also alluding to one of the key indicators of power, social mobility. She explains how her outward appearance—her make-up, hair and shoes—marks her as upper-class despite being a successful prostitute. However, she states: 'With my secondary school certificate and suppressed desires I belonged to the "middle class". By birth I was lower class' (p. 10).

This serves to emphasise how Firdaus perceives or identifies herself—she does not shy away from the label 'prostitute', nor does she exhibit any shame although she does later explain how she became one. It also shows how Firdaus is an amalgam of different facets of social life, hinting at her rise through the ranks even while she retains the essence of each class. Moreover, it establishes her as a universal figure insofar as she embodies the characteristics of all these classes. Malti-Douglas builds on this, labeling Firdaus 'everywoman', particularly when also considering how her power contrasts with the doctor's seeming fragility despite the latter's superior social status.[44] This is yet another marker of Firdaus's dominance in their relationship—she can manipulate the rules of social hierarchy to her own advantage because she has an insider's understanding of how they work.

Firdaus's mother is her first and most lasting female role model. Abdullah *et al.* claim that, as a result of her participation in her daughter's genital mutilation, the bond between

[44] Malti-Douglas, 1995.

Firdaus and her mother is broken and 'Firdaus no longer saw or experienced her mother in the same way'.[45] However, the argument could be made that Firdaus does not experience maternal affection or attention even before the clitoridectomy; she explains how, as a child in the cold family hut, she would crawl up to her mother, seeking her warmth, but, she says, 'my mother used to abandon me alone and go to my father to keep him warm' (p. 16). This is a recurring pattern throughout her childhood: Firdaus's mother abandons her and instead prioritises the patriarch over all other family members. This is most evident in the way she hides food from her hungry children to ensure that Firdaus's father does not go a single night without his supper. All of her efforts are in the service of her role as a wife, and even her maternal instincts are subsumed by the need to serve her husband and meet his needs. This also becomes the expected pattern within most of Firdaus's relationships: abandonment and unmet needs.

Firdaus's mother is characterised by submissiveness and passivity, traits that Firdaus at first emulates. Her mother does not stand up for herself or her children, and she accepts her husband's abuse without question. Firdaus refers to how many of her siblings would die young—apparently from their poor living conditions—but her father would only beat his wife over the death of a son and not that of a daughter. This reveals the father's cruelty in punishing his wife for something that is presumably not her fault while also highlighting the importance of male versus female children within this patriarchal society. The only instance where Firdaus's mother exhibits strength is when she beats Firdaus and arranges for her to be cut, and this is due to the scandal and stigma that could arise from Firdaus's innocuous question about her parentage with its serious implication that her mother might have strayed. However, her

[45] Omar Mohammed Abdullah and others, 'Kristevan Abjection in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*', *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 6.6 S2 (2015), 80-86, p. 81.

reaction is most likely due to a sense of self-preservation and fearful loyalty to her husband. Through these various incidents, Firdaus learns to accept the status quo and that speaking and acting out are not options for women in her society, and so her first reaction to the abuse she has come to expect is silent passivity. This partly explains why, as a child, Firdaus does not fight back against her uncle's sexual abuse or speak up about it. She also submits to this same uncle's decisions about her future when he becomes her guardian after her parents' death: the most painful of these being to marry her off as an eighteen-year-old to a man who is over sixty and physically repellent. Seeking help after her husband beats her, she is told that, as a wife, a duty of 'perfect obedience' (p. 47) is expected of her.

Consequently, silent submission is deeply ingrained in Firdaus within this patriarchal setting. Although it seems ironic to consider the main character of Firdaus a silent woman, as most of the novel consists of her narrative voice, a close reading of the novel shows that she is indeed silent or silenced for most of her life, and the overwhelming reason for the latter is male violence and abuse. For example, when she first talks about her father, she lists the very few things in life that he knew, amongst which are 'how to exchange his virgin daughter for a dowry when there was still time' and 'how to beat his wife and make her bite the dust each night' (p. 10). She then points out his hypocrisy as he, and the other men in her village, are clearly aware of the Islamic teachings that make actions like defaming the honour of a woman and beating another human being sins. However, these sins have become so ingrained and part of their routine lives that the men do not seem aware or to care that they are guilty.

It is this widespread almost casual violence that makes Firdaus's father and the men in the village seem indistinguishable to her. This sentiment is also later expressed by Sharifa, the madam who takes Firdaus under her wing when she runs away from her husband and who

officially teaches her how to be a prostitute.[46] When she asks Firdaus who hurt her, Sharifa then states: 'Any one of them, it doesn't make a difference. They're all the same, all sons of dogs, running around under various names. Mahmoud, Hassanein, Fawzy, Sabri, Ibrahim, Awadain, Bayoumi' (p. 55). Ironically, the names she mentions are actually those of abusive men who appear in Firdaus's life, past and future: Mahmoud is the name of Firdaus's husband, Fawzy will become one of Firdaus's clients, Ibrahim will be the first man Firdaus falls in love with and Bayoumi is the pimp who initiates her into a life of prostitution and whom she escapes before meeting Sharifa. Thus, the repetition of the concept of interchangeable male figures with almost absolute power over women calls attention to the normalisation of gender-based violence and to the expectation that women must submit to this control.

One of the markers of patriarchal power for Firdaus is control over food. Even as Firdaus's mother allows her children to go hungry, Firdaus reveals that her father has no compunctions about eating while his starving children watch each mouthful—he even strikes Firdaus's hand when she dares to reach for his plate. Food thus becomes associated with privilege and power: her father, as the patriarch of the family, is in charge and, as a child and a girl at that, Firdaus has no right to make demands, let alone partake of the food that he provides without his permission. This pattern of food as a means of control also appears later on with Firdaus's husband. He is a miser who begrudges every morsel she consumes, and he states outright that she must gratefully accept his sexual, physical and verbal abuse of her because he is the only person that is prepared to put up with and *feed* her. Firdaus, as first a daughter and then as a wife, is dependent on the men in her life for sustenance because she is not allowed to work and

[46] As with most of the authors in this study, El Saadawi's choice of names for her characters is filled with irony: Sharifa means virtuous or honourable in Arabic.

earn her own money, and so they have the power to choose whether or not she eats and how much. After she runs away from this abusive husband, she meets Bayoumi whom she initially trusts because he willingly feeds her, giving her the illusion of control by asking about her preference in food:

> No one had asked me before whether I preferred oranges or tangerines. My father never bought us fruit. My uncle and husband used to buy it without asking me what I preferred. As a matter of fact, I myself had never thought whether I preferred oranges to tangerines (p. 50).

Bayoumi is later revealed to be abusive, and he is the first person to sell her body to other men for money, but he is important to Firdaus's character development because he opens her eyes to the freedom of choice. Firdaus becomes even more aware of this freedom when she later strikes out on her own as a prostitute and is paid for the first time in her life without a pimp or madam taking her earnings. She decides to use the money to eat in a restaurant, and there are a number of first-time experiences here:

> The movement of [the waiter's] eyes as they avoided my plate cut like a knife through the veil which hung over my eyes, and I realized this was the first time in my life I was eating without being watched by two eyes gazing at my plate to see how much food I took. Ever since I was born those two eyes had always been there, wide open, staring, unflinching, following every morsel of food on my plate (p. 71).

In addition to this incident repeating the motif of knives and cutting, Palmer states that Firdaus's 'buying and eating of the food suggests she feels she has complete ownership of and authority over herself for the first time in her life'.[47] This is when she begins to understand more about how to break free from the prisons of conventional gendered roles—in this instance, financial independence means freedom from patriarchal control and sexual exploitation. Furthermore, the images of eyes are very dominant here, emphasising how she has felt watched, and thus caged, by the judgemental eyes of men and how she now starts to see more clearly.

---

[47] Palmer, 2013, p. 105.

Firdaus is always keenly aware of the eyes of others in *Woman at Point Zero*, especially those that watch her, lending an air of surveillance to this novel. As one of the most significant motifs, eyes are usually described in terms of striking colours and each time they recur they are described in almost identical terms. Hitchcock examines El Saadawi's critique of the, 'seemingly omnipresent masculine gaze in Egyptian culture'.[48] This significant theme is manifest in how Firdaus never seems to break free of the watchful eyes and restrictions of the patriarchy even when she merely walks down the street. Similarly, Malti-Douglas makes the argument that the primary vector of social and male sexual power in El Saadawi's works is the gaze.[49] This fits in with how Firdaus perceives the eyes of other characters and how they both reflect her state of mind and identify power dynamics.

Beyond the description of Firdaus's own knife-like eyes in the first chapter of the novel, the first instance of eyes appears when Firdaus talks about her father and the men in her village. Firdaus states, 'I knew nothing about men' (p. 11), but she observes their, 'wary, doubting, stealthy eyes, eyes ready to pounce, full of an aggressiveness that seemed strangely servile' (p. 11-12). These men seem to embody violence and hypocrisy, and the motif recurs with other examples of oppressive men; the exact same words are used in reference to the different powerful men she observes: rulers and their retinues in newspapers and magazines (p. 27) and the privileged wealthy men who are shielded from the downtrodden and poor by the glass windows of their cars (p. 42). These eyes belong to 'them', the nebulous amorphous mass of

[48] Peter Hitchcock, 'The Eye and the Other: The Gaze and the Look in Egyptian Feminist Fiction', in *The Politics Of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Obioma Nnaemeka (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 70–82, p. 76.
[49] Malti-Douglas, 1995.

oppressors who are all interchangeable yet are characterised by their dominance of women. This image of wary eyes becomes the archetype for oppressive men. She learns from first-hand experience that they are watching her and, sensing weakness, their owners will pounce and devour her.

Another image of eyes that recurs throughout Firdaus's life is that of, 'two rings of intense white around two circles of intense black' (p. 16). The importance of these eyes in particular lies in how they are first linked to her mother. Firdaus places great importance on her mother's eyes:

> I can remember her eyes in particular. I cannot describe their colour, or their shape. They were eyes that I watched. They were eyes that watched me. Even if I disappeared from their view, they could see me, and follow me wherever I went, so that if I faltered while learning to walk they would hold me up (p. 15).

For Firdaus, her mother's black and white eyes are also imbued with a mystical luminescence:

> I only had to look into them for the white to become whiter and the black even blacker, as though sunlight was pouring into them from some magical source neither on earth, nor in the sky, for the earth was pitch black, and the sky dark as night, with no sun and no moon (p. 16).

The darkness that she describes is psychological rather than physical, and the light signifies strength and hope. However, this seems ironic considering her relationship with her mother, who essentially took a part of her away when she had Firdaus circumcised. Palmer suggests that this motif points to the mother's nurturing and protective role: 'However, as the mother drew closer to the repressive father and became alienated from the young girl the nature of the eyes changed'.[50] This is supported by Firdaus's claim that, when she was a little older, her mother was no longer there. Instead, she states, there was a woman who looked exactly the same as her mother but 'when I used to look into her eyes I could feel she was not my mother.

[50] Palmer, 2013, p. 94.

They were not the eyes that held me up each time I was on the point of falling [...] No light seemed to touch the eyes of this woman [...] [they] remained dull, impervious to [the sun's] light, like two extinguished lamps' (p. 17). There are two interpretations for this; the first is her biological mother died and this 'imposter' is the stepmother who has replaced her. The second, perhaps more likely, interpretation is that her mother has been broken down by years of abuse and trauma that have 'extinguished' her spirit, or the magical light that provided Firdaus with comfort, effectively making her a stranger.

Whatever the case, Firdaus looks for these black and white eyes in everyone she meets, and they seem to manifest themselves in the people she feels a strong connection with and who seem to truly care for her. This is evident in the two most noteworthy instances of when she sees these eyes, with her teacher, Iqbal, and her lover, Ibrahim. Her relationships with these two characters are amongst the most impactful and lasting in her life as they teach her about the disappointing reality of love. Iqbal is one of Firdaus's teachers at the girls' boarding school that she attends after her uncle marries, and she is the first person in her life to show her empathy and compassion. Iqbal stumbles across Firdaus crying late one night in the school garden, the silent space where she goes to contemplate her life and worry about her future. Firdaus feels that Iqbal truly sees her, describing how her eyes seem to hold on to her and refuse to let her go, mirroring Firdaus's description of her mother's eyes. As Iqbal sheds her own tears of commiseration in the almost absolute darkness and silence of the night-time garden, Firdaus sees Iqbal's eyes as 'two rings of pure white, surrounding two circles of intense black' (p. 29). The same luminosity she witnessed with her mother is also apparent: 'light […] from some unknown magical source which was neither on the earth, nor in the heavens' (p. 30). Firdaus here views Iqbal as a safe haven, somebody who shares her loneliness and misery. Holding

Iqbal's hand sparks in Firdaus a strange feeling, a distant pleasure, '[a] cloudy awareness of something that could have been, and yet was never lived' (p. 30).

More important, however, is the silencing that takes place when Firdaus tries to express what she feels. She says: 'My lips opened to speak, but my voice failed to come through, as though no sooner did I remember than I had already forgotten' (p. 30). This is followed by fear as though she is on the verge of losing something precious, and it occurs whenever Firdaus sees Iqbal. She does not know how to articulate how she feels as her only point of reference are social norms, which would not cover such a situation, and so her voice fails her time and again. While Firdaus's reaction to Iqbal seems indicative of (homo)sexual tension, Anna Ball suggests that it is actually because the potential for non-sexual love from Iqbal is so unfamiliar that Firdaus can only analyse it in near-erotic terms.[51] Firdaus obsesses about Iqbal to the point where she is accused by her friend of being in love with her. However, at the point when Firdaus finally seems able to speak to her, Iqbal tells her: 'Don't say anything' (p. 34). Firdaus never sees Iqbal again after this although she waits for her in the garden at night, like a lover awaiting a rendezvous, and looks for her as she leaves school for the final time. She is filled with a frantic, almost desperate hope that Iqbal will come to her at any moment, a desire which is never fulfilled. This silencing followed by the abandonment is devastating for Firdaus because it teaches her, once again, that her voice is not important; also, as her first real female relationship at a crucial and formative age, the abrupt ending and disappointment sets a precedent for her later relationships.

The second instance of black and white eyes occurs with the only man she falls in love with: Ibrahim. She meets him during her brief career as an office worker, when she gives up

[51] Ball, 2009, p. 80.

prostitution in the pursuit of respectability. Initially, at least, their relationship follows the same pattern as it did with Iqbal: Ibrahim finds Firdaus crying in the office courtyard one night and shows her compassion and empathy, shedding a few tears himself. She is drawn to him, seeing in his eyes once again 'two rings of pure white surrounding two circles of intense black' (p. 85). She explains that holding hands leads to 'a deep, distant pleasure, older than the age of remembered life, deeper than the consciousness carried within me throughout' (p. 85), followed by the inability to speak: 'my lips parted to express [a memory] in words, but my voice failed to emerge, as though no sooner did I remember than I had already forgotten' (p. 85). As with Iqbal, this loss of voice is also accompanied by the sudden fear that she is about to lose something precious. They meet more than once and, when she is not with him, she obsesses about him to the point of being accused by a friend of being in love with him.

This literal verbal mirroring of the course of her relationship with Iqbal, with the same words and phrases being employed, signifies the importance of both characters as her first meaningful female and male love affairs, even if her feelings are unrequited. With Ibrahim, the relationship develops into a sexual one, and this becomes the only relationship with a man where Firdaus feels hopeful and happy. However, it is short-lived as she discovers that he has become engaged to marry another woman, someone from a well-connected family. She waits for him in the silence of the courtyard, but he never returns. The suffering and pain that she feels at Ibrahim's betrayal and abandonment is worse than any she has ever felt even when selling her body to men: 'As a prostitute I was not myself, my feelings did not arise from within me […] But I expected something from love. With love I began to imagine that I had become a human being' (p. 93). Her self-worth was tied up in this relationship and the loss of that illusory love opens her eyes to the truth: 'A successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and punish them for

being deceived […] Now I realized that the least deluded of all women was the prostitute' (p. 94).

It is evident that the image of black and white eyes is projected onto Iqbal and Ibrahim by Firdaus, and they are initially comforting omens. Even the stark simplicity of the colours seems to symbolise straightforwardness and balance, implying that these are people that Firdaus can trust with her heart. However, this does not prove to be the case. Salti and Saiti suggest that these nurturing eyes, 'come to represent points of illusionary happiness that always precede the moment of betrayal'.[52] This is in fact prefigured by Firdaus's mother during her childhood: Firdaus projects her own powerful emotions onto her, but she invariably discovers that her mother does not reciprocate those feelings and is far from the nurturing supportive maternal figure that she had previously imagined her to be. Firdaus still falls in love with Iqbal and Ibrahim but is abandoned by them both and left heartbroken and alone. She does not see these eyes again after this.

In addition to the haunting black and white eyes that Firdaus sees, there are other eyes that reveal power dynamics within the novel. One example are the dark eyes that appear to watch her whenever she is alone in the streets. These seem to indicate that, away from the protection of a male guardian, she is at the mercy of 'them', in danger of being devoured if she strays too far from her path. Thus, in such instances when this kind of male gaze is directed at Firdaus, she feels powerless, afraid and laid bare. Moore claims that the motif of eyes in El Saadawi's works are 'emblematic of restrictions placed upon a woman's presentation and choices in a patriarchal culture [...] This motivates precocious analysis of the implications of a body

[52] Salti and Saiti, 1994, p. 158.

gendered female'.[53] Firdaus is certainly made more aware of being female with these dark eyes, which travel over her body, focusing on her legs, thighs, belly, breasts and neck with a cold intent.

A further extension of the motif of eyes and the act of seeing in this novel is the motif of mirrors, which shows how Firdaus perceives herself and establishes her own sense of identity. The first time she looks in a mirror is when she goes to live with her uncle in the city after the death of her parents. She is at first frightened because she has never seen a mirror, let alone her own reflection in one. She has trouble reconciling the image with what she knows of herself, but then she recognises her own face, perhaps because of the features she inherited from her parents. Palmer explains that Firdaus 'is aware of her body and of her looks and has a new sense of identity'.[54] This is evident in her reaction to her reflection—Firdaus states, 'I was filled with a deep hatred for the mirror. From that moment I never looked into it again' (p. 20). This hatred perhaps stems from her unresolved feelings towards her parents and indicates a newfound understanding that she might have inherited more than her father's big round nose and her mother's thin lips.

The next time Firdaus looks into the mirror is when Sharifa, the madam who finds her after she escapes Bayoumi, first takes Firdaus to her apartment/bordello and allows her to bathe and dress in soft perfumed clothes. Firdaus claims: 'When I opened my eyes and looked into the mirror I realized that now I was being born again with a new body, smooth and tender as a rose petal' (p. 57). Firdaus's self-proclaimed rebirth marks another shift in identity—gone is the

[53] Moore, 2008, p. 18.
[54] Palmer, 2013, p. 96.

poor, downtrodden, dirty girl, to be replaced by another who now lives a clean, soft and sweet-smelling existence. However, Sharifa quickly clarifies just what is needed to retain this identity:

> You must be harder than life, Firdaus. Life is very hard […] Life is like a snake. They are the same, Firdaus. If the snake realizes you are not a snake, it will bite you. And if life knows you have no sting, it will devour you (pp. 57-58).

Firdaus's new awareness of her body as attractive and a source of strength and power allows her to transform herself into a successful prostitute who is able to strike out on her own and live a luxurious and comfortable life. However, she forgets Sharifa's advice when she falls in love and her heart is broken by Ibrahim's abandonment of her. It is then that the divide between her body and her self becomes more pronounced:

> To protect my deeper, inner self from men, I offered them only an outer shell. I kept my heart and soul, and let my body play its role, its passive, inert, unfeeling role. I learnt to resist by being passive, to keep myself whole by offering nothing, to live by withdrawing to a world of my own. In other words, I was telling the man he could have my body, he could have a dead body, but he would never be able to make me react, or tremble, or feel either pleasure or pain (p. 93).

Her previous passivity now takes on a different dimension—it is now a form of resistance as well as a coping mechanism. Firdaus also shows how she places little value on her body, unlike the many men who have used her. In a sense, her body is simply a means to an end, a tool. After a lifetime of being defined by her body, a commodity over which she has no real control, her heart and soul have become her most valuable possessions. These are the secret parts of her that no person can exploit nor take away from her, and she can keep herself intact simply by keeping men out.

Another important consideration in the analysis of female voices in *Woman at Point Zero* is the relationship between Firdaus's body, her sense of agency and her silence. El Saadawi's portrayal of Firdaus highlights the disconnect that happens between Firdaus's sense of self and

her body, which can be traced back to the perception of women's bodies within the context of Egyptian or Arab social values. For example, Ball discusses the concept of the 'communally defined and owned female body' in Arab patriarchal society, where the female body is not the territory of individual female sexuality but is rather constructed as a vessel for 'familial standing', especially when considering how a family's honour is tied to a woman's sexual behaviour.[55] The fear of deviant female sexual behaviour, which symbolises the loss of family honour, is the driving factor behind female genital mutilation in the Arab world, and it explains why and how Firdaus's mother is quite easily able to arrange her young daughter's clitoridectomy. This milestone traumatic event, Firdaus's first experience of sexual violence, instigates her, 'profound disassociation from her body'.[56] It reinforces the fact that, from the moment she is born and, because of social and cultural norms, Firdaus does not have bodily autonomy. She learns from this brutal act that she is—and will perhaps always be—at the mercy of others, who have the power to make life-changing decisions for her and dictate her worth. This pattern is repeated with other experiences in Firdaus's life, such as her father's control over food, her uncle's sexual abuse, her husband's abuse, and sexual exploitation by Bayoumi, Sharifa, Ibrahim and countless men.

Firdaus accepts her lack of bodily autonomy through passivity, and she detaches from her body as a coping mechanism. She repeatedly refers to how she surrenders her body, 'passively, without any resistance, without movement, as though life had been drained out of it, like a piece of dead wood or old neglected furniture […] or a pair of shoes forgotten under a chair' (p. 47). This analogy is used in reference to incidents of violent sexual attacks—in this case, when her

[55] Ball, 2009, p. 74.
[56] Ball, 2009, p. 75.

husband rapes her after she unsuccessfully seeks refuge with her uncle due to the former's beatings. Later, when Bayoumi shows his true nature and locks her in his room all day and rapes her every night, she describes how she abandoned her body: 'It lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desire, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing. A dead body with no life in it at all, like a piece of wood, or an empty sock, or a shoe' (p. 53). As a prostitute, she repeatedly refers to the men's fingers and nails, how they paw at her and cause her a pain that is mistaken for pleasure. In fact, Firdaus's inability to feel physical and sexual pleasure as a result of the clitoridectomy is one of her biggest points of frustration and the immediate result of her lack of bodily autonomy. The mutilation of her body as a child deprives her of the means to experience the pleasure she once did when playing with Mohammadain, and she spends her whole life chasing that elusive pleasure while never being able to fully regain it. Firdaus always refers to this pleasure as a dream or memory from a distant past:

> My body pulsed with an obscure pleasure, or with a pain that was not really pain but pleasure, with a pleasure I had never known before, had lived in another life that was not my life, or in another body that was not my body (p. 51).

This sexual frustration further increases the divide between Firdaus's self and her body and is a constant reminder of loss and pain.

Firdaus is a woman who is constantly moving forward, always looking for that elusive something that can help her find meaning. While she may passively accept the status quo, she eventually reaches a breaking point and finds a way to escape to a new life and a new identity. However, each time, she realises that, although the faces around her have changed, her circumstances have not. This is perhaps why Firdaus's move from ward to wife to prostitute is portrayed as almost inevitable. Seymour-Jorn argues that *Woman at Point Zero* 'links the different phases of Firdaus's life—phases where she is suppressed, sexually violated and then

comes to the realisation that all women are doomed to serve the needs of men'.[57] Firdaus tries to stand up for herself, but she is repeatedly silenced especially through the abuse of her body.

Firdaus's value is always associated with her body, and it becomes a commodity that is others use for their own gain. Al-Ali claims that 'El Saadawi emphasizes most of her heroines are rebelling against the socially constructed separation between mind and body'.[58] She goes on to quote El Saadawi: 'They are struggling to tell the world around them that they are a whole human being and not just a female body'.[59] This is most apparent when Firdaus decides to leave her comfortable luxurious life as a prostitute to become "respectable". For three years, she works in an office and barely ekes out a living, but she learns that, as a prostitute, she had been respected and valued more highly. In another instance, after taking refuge with Bayoumi, Firdaus tells him her plan to start looking for work using her secondary school qualifications because she cannot remain dependent on him, which precipitates their first argument. His immediate response to her wish for independence is to weaponise her sexuality against her: 'How dare you raise your voice when you're speaking to me, you street walker, you low woman?' (p. 52). He then slaps her and Firdaus describes how she seems to see his eyes for the first time, as they echo the movement of the eyes from the street: 'Two jet black surfaces […] travelled with an infinitely slow movement over my face, and my neck, and then dropped downwards gradually over my breast, and my belly, to settle somewhere just below it, between my thighs' (pp. 52-53). Again, the objectification of her body and, more directly here, her genitalia shows the value Bayoumi places on her, and it is after this incident that he starts to profit off that body by bringing men to have sex with her in exchange for money.

---

[57] Seymour-Jorn, 2002, p, 171.
[58] Al-Ali, 1994, p. 32.
[59] Al-Ali, 1994, p. 32.

Relationships are thus transactional to Firdaus as she thinks about them in terms of trade-offs. The first time Firdaus is paid directly for sex, rather than her earnings falling into the hands of a pimp or madam, she finally understands the nature of money, equating it with the 'forbidden parts of a woman's body' and 'as illicit and forbidden as the thrill of sacrilegious pleasure' (p. 72). Recalling her different experiences with money growing up, she sees that it has always been equated with power, punishment, secrecy and shame. The sense of *quid pro quo* characterises all of Firdaus's relationships as a result; she has been taught that everything comes at a price, even love. Selling her body for money becomes the only way she can be financially independent—even free—as she states: 'All women are prostitutes of one kind or another. Because I was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife' (p. 99). Since her body is the only commodity at her disposal and it is obviously in demand, she is able to succeed in this profession because she is not afraid to ask for the highest price. As she is a successful and wealthy prostitute, a dangerous and well-connected man named Marzouk appoints himself as her pimp, taking the lion's share of her earnings.[60] Firdaus feels that she is no longer in control of her own life and self and that she has become a 'body machine', working day and night for men to get rich at her expense. Seeing her freedom threatened by yet another man who is exploiting her, Firdaus tries to leave—again clinging to the hope that she can use her secondary certificate to find a job—but Marzouk tells her, '[a] woman on her own cannot be a master, let alone a woman who's a prostitute [...] You will never leave" (p. 104). The power differential of the master and slave is extended by Firdaus: 'I hated him as only a woman can hate a man, as only a slave can hate his master' (p. 104). Fighting against years of indoctrinated societal conditioning, Firdaus continues to fight for her freedom, but Marzouk

[60] The name Marzouk means blessed, fortunate or prosperous in Arabic. This belies his greed: he is prosperous due to his exploitation of women, but it is also the cause of his misfortune when it leads to his death.

tries to stop her, and, in the ensuing physical struggle, she kills him with his own knife. The ultimate challenge to male authority thus becomes the act of androcide.

This act catapults her from the role of passive object to dynamic subject, which is further enhanced by her role as narrator. By speaking the story of her life, Firdaus positions herself in the centre of events, as seen from her first-person perspective, which reinforces her power of agency and the polyphonic and dialogic nature of the text. As the narrator, Firdaus controls what she reveals and even the perspective or point of view that the listener/reader experiences through her. For example, at one point in the novel, Firdaus refers to herself in the third person. This is after she discovers that Ibrahim has betrayed her and she decides to fully embrace her career as a prostitute:

> I was like a woman walking through an enchanted world to which she does not belong. She is free to do what she wants, and free not to do it. She experiences the rare pleasure of having no ties with anyone, of having broken with everything, of having cut all relations with the world around her, of being completely independent and living her independence completely, of enjoying freedom from any subjection to a man, to marriage, to love; of being divorced from all limitations whether rooted in rules and laws in time or in the universe...She no longer hopes for anything or desires anything. She no longer fears anything, for everything which can hurt her she has already undergone (p. 95).

This lyrical turn helps to indicate the new phase or cycle in her life. As Hitchcock claims, this switch from the first person to the third indicates a new sense of self for Firdaus and that 'the varidirectional quality […] makes it clear that Firdaus's monologue is not simply monologic'.[61] The dialogic nature of this scene not only adds to the polyphony of the novel but also reveals the disconnect Firdaus feels at this moment as a result of her pain. Up to this point, she had naively attempted to find a place in the world around her that could accept both parts of her,

[61] Hitchcock, 1992, p. 212.

mind and body. However, Ibrahim's betrayal opens her eyes to the truth that she is not destined to achieve her dreams, effectively cutting away her hopes, desires and even fears.

While her murder of Marzouk is one of the definitive moments in this novel, it is followed by one of the most interesting scenes that clarify Firdaus's perception of freedom. After killing Marzouk, Firdaus is approached for sex on the street. After initially refusing, she agrees but charges an insanely high price. Yet after the sexual encounter, she rips up the money:

> The movement of my hands as I tore the money to pieces, tore off the veil, the last remaining veil from before my eyes, to reveal the whole enigma which had puzzled me throughout, the true enigma of my life […] It was as though I was destroying all the money I had ever held […] and at the same time destroying all the men I had ever known (p. 107).

As a child, as a wife, as a prostitute, Firdaus has always been valued in terms of her body and her financial yield. Money has always been a factor in her relationships, and she is now aware of this as she tells her final sexual partner: 'from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up as a prostitute' (p. 108). However, by ripping up the money, she now acknowledges how she was controlled through the promise of payment. Palmer states that, with this defiant act of ripping up the money, 'she is not only ridding herself of them forever but also of their valuation of her and placing a new valuation on herself, a valuation that has nothing to do with money'.[62] Firdaus refuses to be seen in terms of her monetary value anymore, and so she symbolically exorcises the demons of her past.

Firdaus's confession to this final male client paying her for her body makes it apparent that she no longer fears patriarchal authority. The act of androcide and the destruction of the money signify her reclamation of agency over her body and, by extension, her voice. However, imprisoned for her crimes, Firdaus cannot continue to break the cycle by eliminating 'them'—

[62] Palmer, 2013, p. 112.

the patriarchy that systematically and unashamedly uses and abuses women—and so she uses the only weapon at her disposal, her voice, to fight back. She does this by choosing when to speak and when to hold her silence. By controlling the circumstances surrounding the breaking of her silence, she retains some form of control over her body/narrative and ensures her voice is heard on her own terms. She internalises the dichotomy of the 'Other' by becoming the void, absence or lack that is so often equated with women, as apparent when she states that she no longer feels fear, want or need. In embracing this, she is no longer shackled by the expectations of society. She is no longer passive—she is now willing to kill to survive and retain her agency, and that is what makes her a force to be reckoned with.

In 'Introduction to Nawal Al-Saadawi's Ferdaous: A Voice from Hell', Assia Djebar places Firdaus's voice within a wider context when she asks:

> What is a feminist novel in Arabic? First of all, it is a voice—here, a voice 'in hell' of a woman called Paradise—a night murmur, a lament...An ancient wound finally and gradually opened to assume its song. The revolt evolves as it searches for new words: the revolt develops here in the circular, repetitive rhythm of its speech.[63]

This contrast between the meaning of Firdaus's name in Arabic, 'Paradise', and the hell she speaks of reminds the reader that Firdaus's voice is powerful not only because it is the voice of trauma, of Caruth's 'wound that speaks' that denotes pain, but also because it is the voice of revolt and resistance. In her preface to *Woman at Point Zero*, El Saadawi claims that writing Firdaus was an act of resurrecting her voice: 'She stood out amongst the others, vibrated within me, or sometimes lay quiet, until the day when I put her down in ink on paper and gave her life after she had died' (p. xi). Firdaus's story is a cautionary tale, and an example is being made of

---

[63] Djebar, 2004, p. 387.

her through her execution.[64] She is feared because men no longer have power over her, and so she must be killed before she influences others. By refusing to conform, by murdering her oppressor and then showing no remorse, and by adhering to her own form of morality, which is built on her understanding of how men dominate women, the only weapon left in Firdaus's arsenal is her voice.

Firdaus ends her story with just as much control and forcefulness as she starts, with her condemnation of the oppressive patriarchal system: 'I spit with ease on their lying faces and words, on their lying newspapers' (p. 112). On one level, this is the ultimate power play, for, although her voice falls silent again and she is dragged away to be executed, she is still in a position of power because she has taken control of the narrative, waiting until the very last moment possible to speak, emphasising the finality of her story. On another level, the tone of Firdaus's narrative is influenced by her strong belief that she is free as she tells the doctor:

> They know that as long as I am alive they will not be safe, that I shall kill them. My life means their death. My death means their life […] I have triumphed over both life and death because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die. I want nothing. I hope for nothing. I fear nothing. Therefore I am free. For during life it is our wants, our hopes, our fears that enslave us. The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger. They would like to discover that there is after all something which I desire, or fear, or hope for. Then they know they can enslave me once more (p. 110).

Firdaus's truth is not necessarily the only truth, but it is one worth revealing so that others can learn from her trauma and perhaps achieve some level of change.

---

[64] When comparing Firdaus and Shahrazad from *The Thousand and One Nights*, the former seems more forceful and commanding. Shahrazad's storytelling revolves around the double-edged strategy of diversion and deferment, meaning she must draw out her tales to fill the span of many nights while also piquing the sultan's curiosity so that he is willing to wait for the next night's storytelling cycle. Therefore, while she has some degree of power over her audience, Shahrazad is still ultimately at the mercy of the sultan and any loss of interest could result in her death. Ironically, despite this difference in power dynamics in *The Thousand and One Nights* and *Woman at Point Zero*, Shahrazad is able to delay her execution ad infinitum through her storytelling while Firdaus completes her tale in one night and is immediately taken away to be executed.

Keeping silent or speaking are different facets of Firdaus's resistance. There is a parallel to be drawn between her power and her voice. She tells the doctor how she spent her whole life afraid to raise her hand to a man. When she finally overcame that fear, she raised both her hand and her voice because she was also able to express her resistance to male power to the authorities and to articulate her story to the doctor. By telling that story, she reveals her own awakening and, through the power of her voice and her trauma, she can awaken other women. This manifests in the dream-like quality of Firdaus's voice and the influence it has on the doctor, who likens herself to a sleepwalker when she finally meets Firdaus:

> Her voice too was like the voices one hears in a dream. It was close to me, yet seemed to come from afar, spoke from a distance and seemed to arise from nearby. For we do not know from where these voices arise […] We might even think that they come from the depths of the earth […] or fall from the heavens. Or they might even flow from all directions, like air moving in space reaches ears (p. 8).

This description is repeated almost word for word in the final chapter, after Firdaus ends her story, except it is prefaced with the following: 'Her voice was now silent, but its echo remained in my ears, like a faint distant sound' (p. 113). The doctor concludes: 'The voice filling my ears with its sound, echoing in the cell where the window and the door were tightly closed, was a real voice. And I was certainly awake' (pp. 113-14). In both descriptions, the doctor refers to the locked windows and doors. Firdaus's voice is imprisoned and cannot escape until the doctor carries this narrative of resistance outside of the prison walls within her:

> But her [Firdaus's] voice continued to echo in my ears, vibrating in my head, in the cell, in the prison, in the streets, in the whole world, shaking everything, spreading fear wherever it went, the fear of the truth which kills, the power of truth, as savage, and as simple, and as awesome as death [...] At every step, wherever I went, I could see the lies, could follow the hypocrisy bustling around. I rammed my foot down on the accelerator as though in a hurry to run over the world, to stamp it all out. (p. 114)

The transmission of Firdaus's voice is an important function of the doctor as a narrator although it is coloured by her own reflection on the story. It initially fuels her with anger and the urgency

to obliterate the system that perpetuates the cycle of lies and exploitation. Moore discusses the implications of the transmission of Firdaus's voice, citing Djebar's translation of *Woman at Point Zero*: 'the relaying of voice exemplified in *Woman at Point Zero* in and through its different versions […] reminds us that efforts to transmit "the other woman's story" are always both contingent and transformative acts'.[65] The doctor is initially shaken awake by Firdaus's voice, yet the transformative power of Firdaus's voice is temporary: 'But the next moment I quickly lifted my foot and braked hard, and the car came to a halt. And at that moment I realized that Firdaus had more courage than I' (p. 114). Firdaus's voice alone is not enough to achieve change, to 'stamp it all out', but contingent upon the agency and strength of others to resist and fight back.

Saddik Gohar claims that *Woman at Point Zero* empowers the subaltern through breaking the silence and depicting female self-empowerment, viewing Firdaus as 'a replica of contemporary Arab women struggling against male hegemony, supremacy and stagnant religious heritage'.[66] Firdaus's self-empowerment comes at a price; however, death is not the end. El Saadawi states, '[t]he execution of Firdaus does not mean the annihilation of her body. Neither does it mean the victory of male/patriarchal values [...] It is a positive action against traditional passivity of women. However, it has many other meanings, including hope and the power to resist'.[67] Firdaus, like the other characters in this study, cannot die because her story lives on, set free and echoing forth from the small cell in which one woman spoke while the other listened.

---

[65] Moore, 2008, p. 22.
[66] Saddik Gohar, 'Empowering the Subaltern in *Woman at Point Zero*', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 17.4 (2016), 174–89, p. 178.
[67] Al-Ali, 1994, p. 32.

Woman at Point Zero features the testimony of a woman on death row who has been silenced her whole life, who dared to resist and raise her hand to her oppressor and who must now pay the price for her self-empowerment. As a trauma narrative, this novel provides a powerful critique of the factors that perpetuate the oppression and exploitation of Egyptian and Arab women. El Saadawi utilises complex voicing and narrative strategies to amplify the voice of her heroine, Firdaus, and striking motifs that underpin that voice. Firdaus is a survivor of abuse, yet she refuses to play the role of the victim as she challenges patriarchal authority and reveals all to her audience. One of the most important lessons she learns is the power of choice: self-determination and agency are hard-earned luxuries for women like Firdaus, whose choices have been taken away from them all their lives. Furthermore, El Saadawi indicates how the objectification of women's bodies by the dominant patriarchal hierarchy leads to both the sexual exploitation of those women and the perpetuation of the view of women as commodities that can be bought and sold. Firdaus's voice is that of resistance: moving beyond the passive acceptance that characterised her for most of her life, she teaches herself how to fight back. She decides when to talk and to whom. Her silence when she refuses to meet with the doctor signals her power and resistance to power hierarchies. Most importantly, she tells her story in her own words, highlighting how she has taken control of her voice, her body and, thus, her narrative. Firdaus dies, but her story echoes throughout the world, released by the doctor and the author from the locked cell of the prison.

Chapter Four

Outsider, Madwoman, Exile: Narratives of Female Silence in *Pillars of Salt*

The previous chapter was about the resistance of one woman in the face of relentless oppression. The main character in *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus, spends her life coping with abuse through silent passive submission, but eventually, her eyes are opened to the realisation that she can fight back to reclaim her own agency. She makes use of both speaking and silence to provide her testimonial or trauma narrative that echoes from her prison cell into the outside world. This chapter will explore other examples of female silence and narratives in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt,* a novel that provides a multi-voiced, multi-layered depiction of Arab women's struggle for survival in a patriarchal society that is further ravaged by colonialism. The novel revolves around the stories of two women, Maha and Um Saad, who are confined to the same room in a mental asylum and whose stories reveal their trauma.

In this chapter, I will consider the effects of the novel's storytelling techniques and the narrative structures on the depiction of female voices. While *Pillars of Salt* appears to be loosely modelled on *The Thousand and One Nights* storytelling paradigm, my analysis will show how it critiques this tradition inasmuch as it contributes to the marginalisation of women and violence against them. Therefore, I will analyse how women are demonised and their voices undermined in male narratives. The novel features two storytellers, the Storyteller and Maha, with each representing certain normative binary oppositions. The Storyteller imbues Maha with supernatural qualities that are grossly exaggerated and present her as a monstrous destroyer of men. However, Maha's narrative contests this version of herself and her life, revealing how male-constructed narratives 'translate' female experiences, especially of strong, independent and non-conforming women.

I will also examine how this novel depicts the divergence of the male and female gaze through the act of watching and being watched. This is most evident in the parallel between the stories of Maha and Um Saad. The latter's story is characterised by how she secretly observes the outside world and fantasises about the romance and adventure for which she longs. Maha, on the other hand, attempts to live her life without attracting attention to herself, but she is always watched by the men around her, which invariably leads to the misinterpretation and vilifying of her words and actions. The Storyteller's narrative provides an example of how the male gaze can be insidious, as he voyeuristically observes the most personal and intimate experiences of Maha's life and reveals them—with a misogynistic twist—for the entertainment of others. This male gaze objectifies women yet can also be seen as a form of silencing women as it superimposes male desires and perceptions onto them and then holds women accountable for those perceptions. The female gaze, on the other hand, is facilitated by silence: when these women choose not to speak, they enact their own form of resistance to patriarchal hierarchies and narratives based on their ability to see the world as it truly is.

Furthermore, I will explore how *Pillars of Salt* portrays the double jeopardy of postcolonialism and patriarchy on the women in the novel. Taking into account that this novel is described by Moore as 'a feminist vision of Orientalism',[1] I will consider how Faqir's strategic use of language and historical context allows for a critique of both the normative Arab patriarchal system and colonial Orientalist vision. The different narrative voices reveal key elements of gender roles and norms in both urban and rural settings, which are further exacerbated by colonial occupation and violence.

[1] Fadia Faqir, "You arrive at a truth, not the truth": An Interview with Fadia Faqir, 2011 <https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1320> [accessed 16 March 2023], p. 7.

Finally, the asylum itself is an interesting space that allows for female solidarity and testimonial in *Pillars of Salt* while also acting as a microcosm for the outside world. I will examine the relationship between the two women's stories within the context of the asylum, especially in terms of voicing trauma. Both women are considered outsiders in their respective communities due to their unwillingness or inability to conform to societal norms or standards. Both women reach their separate breaking points that manifest in acts of rebellion, but this female rage or defiance is silenced through the patriarchal construct of female insanity. Confined to the mental asylum, '[t]he end of the journey', they are at the mercy of a male English doctor who constantly tries to silence them, and speaking their stories is a therapeutic tool that allows them a form of release or escape.[2] However, while Um Saad is almost obsessively compelled to speak her story night after night, Maha's version of her story is not spoken aloud, which also begs the question of how it is transmitted to the reader.

Pillars of Salt is set in Jordan during the advent of the British Mandate in the 1920s and up to its eventual independence in 1956, and it features two women who meet in a mental asylum. Maha, a Bedouin from the village of Hama, is joined by her new roommate, Um Saad, a Syrian émigré from the city of Amman. Both have been interred against their will by male family members for supposed hysteria-fuelled transgressions, and they struggle to retain their sense of identity within the confines of the asylum. Maha does this by reliving her memories in a series of flashbacks; she narrates her life, revealing her love for her father's land, her marriage to Harb, one of men in her village, and the challenges she faces as a new bride and then as a widow when he is killed by the British. This story is intersected by the voice of an outsider

---

[2] Fadia Faqir, *Pillars of Salt* (London: Quartet Books, 1996), p. 8. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

looking in, the Storyteller, who depicts a very different version of the same events: his point of view renders Maha a dark and supernatural *femme fatale* who is a bane to the men around her. During the silent night-time hours in the asylum, Maha's flashbacks are interrupted by Um Saad's rendition of her own story. In a series of quasi-philosophical ponderings, she talks about a childhood spent longing for affection and adventure and a marriage devoid of happiness. Through her continued secretive observation of the world around her, Um Saad tries to find an escape from an identity that does not reflect her true self. Through these three characters' narratives, the novel depicts themes of exile and female insanity while also raising questions about female voicing and representation.

Pillars of Salt focuses on the lives of individuals set against a vital historical and cultural backdrop that encompasses both colonial and postcolonial tensions. The importance of this context is revealed in the 'Historical Chronology' section that is featured at the beginning of the novel and that outlines the main political events to take place in the region from the year 1187 to 1956. This provides a point of reference for readers by situating the different threads of the story within a larger historical context that might not be familiar to all. Additionally, Tawfiq Yousef points out how certain dates provided at the beginning of the novel also correspond to major events in Maha's personal life.[3] This can be seen to indicate how individual and collective experiences intersect, mirroring marginalised and dominant narratives.

In her narrative, Maha, the main female character, lives with her father and brother, Daffash, in the village of Hamia near the Dead Sea, witnessing the birth of the British Mandate in the region. As a form of internationally sanctioned colonisation, the British mandatory authority took over the administration of what was then known as Transjordan in 1921. For

[3] Tawfiq Yousef, 'Postcolonialism Revisited: Representations of the Subaltern in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*', *Sino-US English Teaching*, 13.5 (2016) <https://doi.org/10.17265/1539-8072/2016.05.007>, p. 381.

Maha, this is also when she experiences her own life-changing event: the death of her mother. Her narrative opens to reveal that her father, Nimer, has been greatly impacted by this loss. His grief and declining health, in addition to his son's indifference, lead him to rely on Maha to be his companion, housekeeper and unpaid worker on his farm. Tariq Tell explains how the British built a unified administration in the region based on the foundations laid by the previous Ottoman Empire, namely, 'a basic infrastructure of transport and communication, a productive and quasi-commercialized agrarian base, an expanded and partially detribalized population, and a "history of popular acceptance of direct rule"'.[4] The Storyteller provides insight into this when he describes English soldiers and travellers studying and measuring the land to delineate the Mandate territory near Maha's village.

Within this colonial framework, Maha's brother—antagonistic, volatile and obsessed with the city—views the newly established Mandate as the precursor of modernity and progress in the region. He can be seen to represent the existing patriarchal system and he acts as a collaborator as he attempts to ingratiate himself with the English. For example, he brings English guests to his sister's wedding, including the daughter of the leader in the area, and their scrutiny and thinly veiled contempt reflect the stereotypical attitude of the coloniser confronted by the natives. Daffash also acts as a translator for the English, despite being illiterate, leading to instances of miscommunication that are both ridiculous and potentially dangerous, but that reflect the discord between the coloniser and colonised. *Pillars of Salt* also portrays imperialistic fascination with the history of the colonised land; Daffash uses this to his advantage as he helps his employer, Samir Pasha, look for artefacts that can be sold to English travellers, highlighting how the land is stripped of its cultural identity and history for profit.

[4] Tariq Tell, 'The Social Origins of Mandatory Rule in Transjordan', in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, ed. by Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan, (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 212–24, p. 215.

Um Saad also describes how a museum in Amman is only visited by English travellers because they are obsessed with the past in a way that the locals are not. These snapshot moments contribute to the portrayal of postcolonial anxiety of erasure and exile.

In 1923, the Mandate's reinstating of central taxation led to proto-nationalist revolts, which the British managed to quell, only for renewed resistance to the later imposition of new land taxes.[5] *Pillars of Salt* alludes to the refusal of villagers to pay tax arrears to the British, and the character of Harb—whose name means "war" in Arabic—exemplifies the rebellion led by Bedouin tribesmen attempting to preserve their way of life and fiscal independence. Shortly after marrying Maha, he joins the resistance fighting against the British military forces, spending long stretches of time away from home until he is killed in a raid. His legacy lives on with the birth of his son, Mubarak, and there is a period of relative quiet in Maha's life as she focuses on rebuilding her life. This mirrors how, over time, the Anglo-Arab government put in place by the Mandate allowed for the establishment and independence of the Emirate of Transjordan in 1946 although complete independence was only reached in 1956, with what is known today as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. However, Maha's life follows a different path as she is robbed of her independence. This takes place after her father's death, when she inherits the farm. Daffash attempts to coerce her into signing it over to him through threats of violence or forcibly marrying her off. She resists, even enlisting the help of other women from the village, but Daffash and the men of the village overpower them. Maha is taken to a mental asylum, leaving Daffash to take both her son and her farm as his own.

The historical context grounds this text in the reality of Jordanian history while also providing a contrast to the nonlinear and psychological nature of the narrators' tales. This is

[5] Tell, 2015, p. 215.

evident in how none of the historical events featured in the chronology are directly depicted—they take place off-stage, so to speak, drawing attention to the aftermath more than the event itself. For example, neither Maha nor the Storyteller directly witness the deaths of Harb and his compatriots—rather, Maha describes finding his remains and she relates her grief while the Storyteller claims to have seen the events in a snuff-induced haze. The chronology provides a yardstick by which an approximate timeline of the characters' stories can be measured, allowing the reader to situate both Maha and Um Saad's stories in time based on their references to the British leaving Jordan.

The narratives of Maha and Um Saad, in particular, are complicated by nonlinear movement in time and setting. Maha and Um Saad alternate between their pasts in the Jordan Valley and Amman, respectively, and their present existence in the mental asylum. The fluidity of time is most apparent in the asylum's trauma narratives. Maha is imprisoned as a relatively young woman when her son, Mubarak, is a toddler. By the time she is joined by Um Saad, it is unclear how long she has actually been incarcerated. Maha always pictures her son as she left him—an infant—at times stating that her breasts ache with the need to feed him although she herself is now grey-haired and beyond the age of breastfeeding. Roughly estimating the novel's 'present day' setting based on the historical chronology would place the women in the asylum some time in the 1940s or 1950s, or after the end of the British Mandate in Jordan. Yet, for Maha especially, reliving her memories allows her to experience time differently, to exist simultaneously both in the past and the present. In an interview with Moore, Faqir explains her use of nonlinear temporal frameworks in her novels: 'The human mind works randomly; it free-associates. If you want to represent thought process, your form can never be entirely linear'.[6]

[6] Faqir, 2011, p. 4.

For Maha, then, this kind of free-associating thought process is reflected in how she abruptly transitions between past and present and the desert and the asylum, but also in how she clings to the idea of Mubarak as a child. She is trying to cope with the trauma of being widowed, exiled from her home and forcibly parted from her son, and while she has perhaps accepted the former two, the loss of her son plagues her the most. So, for Maha, her relationship with Mubarak remains that of a mother and her infant—she cannot envisage him as the adult he must now be as she immerses herself in memories of the past.

This temporal nonlinearity can also be seen as representative of both female time and reliving of trauma: in both cases, time moves differently. Women's time is invariably cyclical, linked to the various seasons of a woman's body, such as menstruation and gestation while a traumatic experience, 'defies linear time through interruptions and the interference of flash-backs and other traumatic disorders'.[7] Thus, Maha and Um Saad experience time differently in the asylum and this is reflected in both their narratives through nonlinearity, flashbacks and interruptions. This elasticity in time and even place in *Pillars of Salt* lends the novel an ambiguity and a timelessness—while the historical context is important to the characters storylines, their trauma and their voices are not necessarily governed by the normal parameters of time or space.

Pillars of Salt combines different voices and viewpoints within a complex framework of oral storytelling. All three main narrators use the first-person point of view, and their stories represent different levels of narrative. The Storyteller's tale constitutes the frame narrative, as

[7] Dalia Said Mostafa, 'Literary Representations of Trauma, Memory, and Identity in the Novels of Elias Khoury and Rabī' Jābir', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 40.2 (2009), 208–36 <https://doi.org/10.1163/008523709X12470367870065>, p. 209.

his chapters start and end the novel, and Maha's story provides another version, making it a parallel diegetic narrative, as it functions on the same narrative level. Complicating matters further, Um Saad's narrative is both framed by and embedded in Maha's narrative—Maha provides the opening and closing of Um Saad's chapters, and Um Saad's metanarrative is enclosed in quotation marks, indicating that Maha is, in a sense, reporting or relaying it. In addition to these three narrators, other less formal narrators are further embedded in their narratives, such as Maha's mother-in-law, Tamam, who tells her a short story.

Each of the alternating narrative episodes is characterised by distinct speech patterns and identifiable characteristics that lead to an intricate polyphony of voices that mimic traditional oral narratives. The use of oral storytelling elements such as formulaic speech and repetition also contribute to narrative organization, and this is especially evident at the beginning of each of the novel's chapters as well as with certain repeated refrains.[8] For example, Um Saad always signals the start of her narrative by saying 'Maha, sister', and Maha repeats certain expressions throughout her narrative, such as the analogy 'my luck is scattered like flour' whenever she experiences trauma or hardship, and 'twin of my soul' when she refers to Harb. [9] Such examples are further enhanced by the studied differences in style and tone that set each narrator apart and allow for the contrasting of their voices.

The Storyteller is perhaps the most problematic character in the novel in terms of his gendered and colonial representations of Arab women. Although he only narrates nine chapters—as opposed to Maha narrating part of Um Saad's sixteen chapters in addition to her own twenty-two—his tale is condensed and highly detailed, requiring careful consideration. As

---

[8] Neal R. Norrick, *Conversational Narrative: Storytelling in Everyday Talk* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000), p. 47.

[9] This appears to be taken from a poem or song that Maha quotes in full at one point:
'My luck is like flour | Scattered in a thornfield. | On a windy day, they asked | Barefoot men to collect it.' (p. 114)

the Storyteller narrates the first and final chapters, it is through his eyes that the reader first views Maha and he is the one to provide the ending to Maha's story. This, in itself, is intriguing—in a novel about women and their narratives, why is it that the first and final voice to be heard is a man's? Furthermore, what does the contrast between Maha's actual end and the Storyteller's version mean? I would argue that the Storyteller's tale frames those of Maha and Um Saad to intentionally position it as the dominant narrative, indicating that his story about Maha is the accepted version of events.

The Storyteller's narrative combines traditional oral storytelling techniques with unique stylistic elements that establish his voice as the authority. He tells/retells Maha's story, structured around the main events of her life, but his version is more fantastical, featuring Gothic-like supernatural elements.[10] He claims to have heard the details he narrates from Maha herself, but his narrative reveals that he has only ever been an eyewitness, present for most of her life—albeit in the background—watching Maha on the outskirts but never participating or acknowledged. He relies on the hearsay of others, such as the watchman, Raai, with both men providing their own interpretation of events. The Storyteller's opening—the very first lines of the novel—in particular, introduces his background and 'credentials' while also initiating narrative patterns that he adheres to later on:

> In the name of Allah the Beneficent, the Merciful: "confound not truth with falsehood, nor knowingly conceal the truth." Oh most illustrious masters […] Tonight, the first night of Ramadan, the month of fasting and worship, I will recount to you an horrific story. During the month of Ramadan, Allah the Mighty King revealed the Qur'an, mankind's guidebook through the forest of wrong and right. But I, Sami al-Adjnabi, the best storyteller in Arabia and the oldest traveller in the Levant, will reveal to you the tale of Maha, unfold the multi-layered secrets of both past and present and leave you shaking

[10] The Storyteller's narrative can also be seen as reminiscent of travel or adventure fiction—or tropes that are stereotypically considered more appealing to a male audience. On the other hand, Maha's brand of magical realism is presumably intended for a female audience, especially considering the intimate details she discloses about her sexuality and body, such as the consummation of her marriage and the fertility rite that she undergoes, which would be culturally unacceptable to discuss in public or to a male audience. This parallel between both narratives and their intended audience points to the difference in gendered genre reading, which further impacts how Maha is perceived or portrayed in each narrative.

> with terror and thirsty for more. Invoke Allah for mercy and forgiveness and plead for his pardon (p. 1).

Here, the Storyteller starts with what later reveals itself to be his formulaic narrative opening, by invoking the name of Allah and a recitation from the Holy Qur'an. This pattern is repeated in all his chapters, and his choice of Qur'anic verse sets the tone for his narrative episode and ties in with the events he depicts. In this example, quoting verse (Qur'an 2:42), in particular, is very deliberate: he is presenting his narrative as the truth. This is especially ironic as the verse preceding this (which he does not quote) starts with "And believe in that which I reveal" (Qur'an 2:41). This and the reference to Allah's revelation of the Qur'an during Ramadan can be seen as a subtle—and somewhat blasphemous—analogy as he compares it with his own revelation of Maha's story. Equating his narrative, or what amounts to a story about an unknown woman, with the most sacred religious text in Islam forces the reader/listener to question what the two have in common and points to his conceit and sense of self-importance as the 'best' storyteller because he is also comparing himself, in a sense, with divinity, the Creator. This is also designed to encourage the audience's belief in him as a storyteller who knows all. On another level, Thomas Herzog points to how the spoken word occupies a central position in Arab culture and "[a]ll important foundation texts of Arab culture are orally performed and transmitted texts", including the Qur'an.[11] Thus, by linking the revelation of the Qur'an to his own oral narrative, the Storyteller is perpetuating this Arab tradition of orality while also aligning it with religious authority.

This introduction in the first chapter of *Pillars of Salt* positions the Storyteller as emblematic of the traditional Arab storytelling or *hakawati* tradition.[12] This framing device can

---

[11] Thomas Herzog, 'Orality and the Tradition of Arabic Epic Storytelling', in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. by Karl Reichl (Berlin: De Gruyter, Inc., 2011), pp. 629–51, p. 629.

[12] It is worth mentioning the Palestinian Al-Hakawati Theatre, which derives its name and purpose from the traditional role of the storyteller. See: Reuven Snir, 'The Palestinian Al-Hakawati Theater: A Brief History', *The Arab Studies Journal*, 6/7.2/1 (1998), 57–71. The purpose of the Hakawati Theatre is, 'to establish a national

be seen as the patriarchal counterpart to the female Shahrazad storytelling paradigm, as epitomised by Maha and, to a lesser extent, Um Saad.[13] Traditionally, the *hakawati* was, 'an itinerant storyteller who appeared in places such as cafes and public squares and told his stories based mainly upon ancient folk tales and legend'.[14] In *Pillars of Salt*, the Storyteller proclaims he is the 'oldest traveller' and he peppers his tales with references to religious texts, popular fables and parables, poetry and songs and well-known historical figures, both of which mark him as a *hakawati*. The Storyteller uses catchphrases like 'Some say' (p. 2) and 'Those in the know will tell' (p. 2), pointing to the oral transmission of stories through word of mouth. He also directly addresses his audience with flair and pomp—for example, 'Oh, most illustrious masters' (p. 28). He chooses Ramadan for his episodic "revelation", a month during which there would traditionally be a resurgence of storytelling sessions. It is evident here that the Storyteller positions his story as cautionary, with repeated supplications for forgiveness and admonitions against wrongdoings, although he also exhibits a sense for the dramatic and a ghoulish fascination with the shortcomings of his characters, in particular Maha. The positioning of the Storyteller as a *hakawati* is significant because it indicates the potential of his narrative to reach a wider audience and thus establishes it as the popular or accepted version of Maha's story.

The Storyteller further emphasises his role in how he continuously presents himself as a teller of tales and by the company he keeps. For example, he repeats a refrain that he adapts based on his tale: 'I am the storyteller. My box is full of tales. Yes, the yarn-spinner. I spin and spin for days' (p. 4). Ironically, this can also be seen as an indication of the Storyteller's propensity to embellish, hinting at possible duplicity in his stories. Also, as befits his status as

---

theatrical framework which would contribute to the strengthening of Palestinian culture, as well as provide an artistic venue to intensify the national awareness of the Palestinians' (p. 58).

[13] The role of *hakawati* was often inherited from father to son, indicating the transmission and preservation of male narratives through patrilineal social structures. This contrasts with the Shaharazad trope, with female narratives becoming a form of self-preservation under the threat of erasure or death by a male authority figure.

[14] Snir, 1998, p. 60.

travelling storyteller, he reveals that he is accompanied by animal "sidekicks", the she-ass, Aziza, and the monkey, Maymoon.[15] The Storyteller often addresses them, calling upon them to aid him or to bear witness, or simply mentioning them as his companions on his travels and observations of Maha and the village. More often than not, however, they are sources of comic relief. For example, in the first chapter, the Storyteller's tone immediately switches from sage to eccentric as he first addresses his she-ass, supplicating jinn soldiers to translate the braying of an ass into human speech, then sings a song to his monkey imploring him to dance. The Storyteller's inclusion of these companions can be seen as a strategic storytelling device as it invokes traditional tales that often featured such animals.[16]

The Storyteller is positioned to present both the patriarchal and colonial point of view, especially considering his identity and the cultural conflict and contradiction that characterise his narrative. Names are crucial identifiers in this novel, with the meaning of each character's name in Arabic indicating the very nature of that character.[17] The Storyteller's name, Sami al-Adjnabi, is the first clue to the double role that he plays. While Sami is somewhat common in the Arab world, this name is still considered ethnically ambiguous with roots in both Western and Middle Eastern cultures. Furthermore, the epithet, al-Adjnabi, literally means "the foreigner" in Arabic, marking the Storyteller as an outsider. He also states 'I was half-Arab with an endless hunger for stories' (p. 3); he can be seen to straddle the line between cultures, implying that he exists both inside and outside of the story he tells, part of the Arab world and yet not fully so. In fact, Faqir intentionally positions the Storyteller as an outsider who 'is not allowed access to

[15] The choice of names seems ironic as the Arabic meaning of Aziza, powerful or beloved, and Maymoon, blessed, belie the negative cultural perceptions of these animals.

[16] For example, *Kalila wa Dimna* is a popular collection of fables translated into Arabic from the original Sanskrit and whose narrators and characters are animals.

[17] This even applies to pets as well as the names of the Storyteller's animal companions. For example, Maha's cow is named Halabeh, an Arabic word that refers to an animal that can be milked, and her dog is named Nashmi, which means brave in Arabic and is often used in Jordanian culture, in particular, to describe someone who exhibits positive cultural and nationalistic values such as bravery, chivalry, generosity, loyalty and so on.

the indigenous culture', stating: 'I see the storyteller as an Orientalist in cahoots with both the colonial forces and indigenous patriarchy—the three work hand-in-hand'.[18] This is evident, for example, in how he often misquotes or misinterprets religious texts. Maha herself is never aware of the Storyteller's presence—the two do not actually meet face to face, and the Storyteller's narrative reveals that he never directly interacts with her. Furthermore, he is only mentioned once in Maha's narrative as 'a stranger who stayed in our village' (p. 143), followed by her mother-in-law's pronouncement of him as 'that drivelling liar' (p. 143). This dig hints that his story is not to be taken at face value while also reaffirming the Storyteller's position as an outsider.

As the story progresses, the Storyteller further distances himself from any Arab or Islamic heritage. Although he presents himself as religious and despite his apparent depth of knowledge—he often makes obscure folkloric and cultural references, for example—he is also emphatic about being 'a stranger in their land' (p. 34). He claims 'I remembered that I was a foreigner to their land and that I studied the Qur'an when I was young, but never prayed to Allah […] The people of Qasim had a funny way of praying and I struggled hard to suppress my laughter' (p. 31), and he even refers to 'Allah of the Muslims' (p. 243), which raises doubts about his religiosity. It is thus likely that the only reason that the Storyteller initially refers to his "Arab-ness" is to ingratiate himself to his audience and establish himself as an authority, but he is unable to mask his actual perception of himself as superior and not one of "them".

In her introduction to *In the House of Silence*, Faqir discusses the need for Arab women to create their life history 'due to their suffering the "double jeopardy" of being women and political dissidents in the Arab world'.[19] This double jeopardy is exemplified in this novel with

[18] Faqir, 2011, p. 7.
[19] Faqir, 1998, p. 9.

the female characters' existence within an oppressive patriarchal hegemony that is, in turn, governed by a colonial power. The asylum in *Pillars of Salt* mirrors this hierarchal structure, perpetuating a system that attempts to silence women like Maha and Um Saad, who are nevertheless able to tell their tales.

As storytellers, Maha and Um Saad differ from the Storyteller as they present more realistic or grounded oral narratives that relay the depth of their experiences as women. Maha's pragmatic yet evocative voice provides the mundane details of her story, overlaid by spiritual and almost mystical elements. Her storytelling episodes are characterised by an almost abrupt beginning, setting the reader in the middle of events, but if her chapters were placed consecutively without the Storyteller's version and Um Saad's interruptions, they would form one continuous cohesive story. Alternatively, Um Saad's narrative is more intimate and philosophical, with a formulaic structure that indicates the beginning of her episodes. The following example displays the trademarks of Um Saad's chapter openings, as well as how it is framed by Maha's narrative voice:

> "Maha, sister," called Um Saad. | I looked at the barred window and at the misty moon. A remote white lie. A hospital. Drugs and clouds. I turned my head and said, "Yes, Um Saad." | "All the eyes of human beings are asleep […] all except our eyes" (p. 40).

Um Saad always waits until nightfall to speak, signalling the beginning of her narrative by calling 'Maha, sister'. Interrupted in her own musings or flashbacks, Maha always provides an image that anchors herself—and the reader—in the present. This kind of interaction always precedes Um Saad's narrative, and she waits for Maha to acknowledge her before she starts her story, establishing that she has a listener and that it is safe to speak. This transition from Maha to Um Saad's point of view emphasises the episodic nature of the narrative and the difference in narrative voice.

In terms of the storytelling setting, the asylum performs an important function in that it mirrors society, allowing for a critique of the intersectionality of patriarchy and colonialism. The women are forcibly admitted to the asylum by male family members who wish to be rid of them. As the asylum itself is run by an English doctor and his Arab staff, there is a clear parallel to the power hierarchies of the "outside" world, namely, British colonial rule over a male-dominated society. This is evident in how Maha always emphasises the doctor's foreignness: she mentions his steel-blue eyes, his name and his broken or 'foreign' Arabic. She also constantly uses qualifiers when referring to him, for example, calling him "[t]he English doctor, who came from the land of churches and clubs" (p. 223) and 'the foreign doctor, who rules over us like a king' (p. 240). Amongst his "subjects" are the asylum staff, who are portrayed as condescending—and menacing as they follow out the doctor's orders by controlling the women and ensuring their complicity: 'I think our kids will go to sleep now' (pp. 41-42). As women within this hierarchal system, Maha and Um Saad are expected to submit as the English doctor and Arab staff repeatedly attempt to subdue and silence them. Ayham Orouq discusses how the asylum can be seen as a special space for the psychological persecution of Maha and Um Saad by a 'colonial enterprise in complicity with their own society'.[20] Similarly, Sinno points to the 'collaborative relationship between the domineering, sexist colonizers and the obsequious natives who chose to embrace them' as embodied by the team running the asylum.[21]

This complicity or collaboration manifests most in the asylum in the form of an oppressive silencing of female voices. Maha and Um Saad are forced into silence, especially by the doctor, which leads to their nighttime storytelling sessions as the only "safe" time. The doctor's initial excuse for them to stop talking is the lateness of the hour and because they are upsetting other

---

[20] Ayham Abu Orouq, 'A Double Colonization: The Case of the Arab Bedouin Woman in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*', *Romanian Journal of English Studies*, 18.1 (2021), 76–87 <https://doi.org/10.1515/rjes-2021-0009>, p. 79.
[21] Sinno, 2011, p. 80.

patients. However, it later becomes apparent that his silencing of the women is an extension of his authority; he is baffled, repeating the same sentence on two separate occasions: 'You two never stop talking' (p. 118) and 'You never stop talking' (p. 222). In another scene, the women become disruptive, singing about being locked up in the madhouse, infuriating the doctor, who starts shouting at them 'in a different tongue', then tells them to shut up in Arabic, to which Maha replies: 'No, you, shut your foreign mouth' (p. 201). This is especially ironic and furthers the sense of disorientation, as Maha's act of voicing her challenge to his authority also silences him. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on language here, with Arabic perceived as native and the doctor's English as foreign. Considering the novel was originally written in English, this evokes questions of linguistic representation and how both Arabic and English are used to challenge and critique power dynamics. The women continue to communicate their stories—albeit under cover of night—because, in the microcosm of the asylum, talking is a sign of noncompliance and resistance to the authority of the doctor, who then enacts punitive measures such as drugging the women and cutting or shaving their hair. The latter act is cruel, humiliating and ultimately another form of silencing, as Maha states: 'This is what they do to control us' (p. 223). However, Maha and Um Saad resist that control by giving voice to their own stories.

The strategic use of language in *Pillars of Salt* is of vital importance as it represents the intersection of different discourses. This is the first anglophone novel to be analysed in this study that was written in English without translation or collaboration, implying a predominantly Western readership and a wider reception in the global marketplace. In fact, *Pillars of Salt* can be seen to meet Brouillette's formula for "successful" postcolonial literature: 'it is English language fiction; it is relatively "sophisticated" or "complex" and often anti-realist; it is politically liberal and suspicious of nationalism; it uses a language of exile, hybridity, and

"mongrel" subjectivity'.[22] The complex thematic content and narrative structure of the text reflect a deeper dimension that allows for a more diverse and sustained reading of the novel as an example of diasporic literature. The genre is characterised by a certain preoccupation with identity, representation and, in this case, what it means for an Arab to write in English. In her interview with Moore, Faqir refers to her writing in English, her second language, as possessing a 'forked tongue', explaining about postcolonial writers: 'We master the English language and we write back in English; in other words, we carve a space for ourselves within it'.[23] Faqir's characters also carve their own space within the dominant discourse as they share the stories of their trauma.

Pillars of Salt features the language of exile and hybridity through a disorienting amalgamation of Arabic and English. This is intended as a strategy of defamiliarisation, presenting a hybridised form of language that reflects the duality of Faqir's diasporic authorial voice as well as the experiences of the characters, caught as they are between the traditions of their culture and the intrusions of the coloniser. Sinno explains that 'Faqir pulls her readers out of their comfort zones' by incorporating 'Arabic allusions, proverbs, metaphors, and images that might be initially disorienting to a non-native speaker of Arabic'.[24] At times, then, the novel is written in English that seems "Arabicized". For example, certain Arabic linguistic constructs or vernacular expressions are literally translated but are so cleverly inserted into the text that they appear natural and do not interrupt the flow. So, when Maha finds out Daffash has raped her friend, Nasra, she seethes, 'I will drink your blood' (p. 12). Non-native speakers of Arabic would be forgiven for considering this a vampiric allusion—in fact, it is an Arabic expression of anger that is the equivalent of the English 'I will kill you'. Traditionally spoken social cues

[22] Brouillette, 2007, p. 61.
[23] Faqir, 2011, p. 10.
[24] Sinno, 2011, pp. 70-71.

are also literally translated, rendering them almost nonsensical: 'Your coffee is drinkable' (p. 25), 'We will hold her in our eyes' (p. 46) and 'May his unlived years be yours' (p. 189) are some of the clearest examples.[25]

This strategic defamiliarisation and the resulting hybridised language both privilege and critique the two languages. Diya Abdo discusses how Faqir and *Pillars of Salt* function as 'double agents', arguing that this text successfully addresses multiple audiences and 'creates a third language and space that critiques these cultures and consciousnesses by alienating English-speaking readers from their own language and estranging Arabic from the Arabic-speaking readership'.[26] Faqir's defamiliarisation strategies thus function on a linguistic and cultural level. Faqir herself refers to the concept of a third space in her introduction to *The Golden Chariot* as the space within language wherein standard perceptions of language are rejected and characters question the culture that mispresents their experiences.[27] Extrapolating from this to *Pillars of Salt*, the novel's third space is linked to the critique of English (colonialism) and Arabic (nationalism) in terms of their surface differences and deeper similarities in how they misrepresent female experiences. Abu-Shomar links 'third space positioning' to dialogism wherein 'identities are always in flux, split between two or more worlds, cultures, and languages'.[28] Thus, Faqir's designation as a diasporic writer of an anglophone text is reflected in her representation of hybrid voicing, identity and cultures in this novel.

---

[25] The first example is part of the traditional Arab *jaha* when asking for a woman's hand in marriage—male family members from both sides gather and, traditionally, the father of the bride offers coffee, but the groom's side refuses to drink the coffee until their request has been granted. If their coffee is "drinkable", it means the bride's father agrees to marry his daughter. The second expression is used to signify that a person will be looked after. The final example is traditionally used to express condolences when someone has died.

[26] Abdo, 2009, pp. 239-40.

[27] Faqir, 2007, p. v.

[28] Abu-Shomar, 2015, p. 130.

Pillars of Salt provides a dominant and counter-narrative in the form of the stories of the Storyteller and Maha, allowing Faqir to depict the degree to which representation is gendered. Malti-Douglas argues that the primary vector of social and sexual power is the gaze.[29] In this case, the novel's two main parallel narratives reveal how the male and female gaze reflect the perception of truth, social acceptance and power dynamics. These narratives are structured to showcase the dichotomies of male and female, fantasy and reality, sanity and madness, dominance and oppression, West and East and—ultimately—good and evil. Furthermore, Fadia Suyoufie suggests that Faqir's work employs a strategy of appropriation in that it recreates Orientalist fantasies and forges an imaginary discourse; this perpetuates the Oriental woman as an object of desire and projects the female body as a subject to male/female gaze, but also re-enacts a masculine pose in a traditional area reserved for males.[30] The Storyteller's narrative reveals an almost voyeuristic fascination with Maha and her body. He portrays her as both desirable and demonic, reflecting the ambivalence with which female sexuality and power is viewed within the prevalent patriarchal social structure. Faqir thus contrasts the narrative of this traditionally male character, the storyteller or *hakawati*, who perpetuates an Orientalist fantasy of Arab women that centres around their bodies, with that of Maha, the 'body' he observes. In doing so, Faqir not only critiques this male position but also allows women to speak back and challenge such objectification.

The link between female bodies and voices in this novel also plays a role in how female identity is constructed from a male and female perspective. There are many examples of men controlling women and their bodies through culturally defined gender roles that privilege male

[29] Malti-Douglas, 1995.
[30] Fadia Suyoufie, 'The Appropriation of Tradition in Selected Works of Contemporary Arab Women Writers', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 39.2 (2008), 216–49, p. 227.

experiences and authority. This allows men to speak about and *for* women, effectively silencing them. For example, the Storyteller initially claims that Maha herself is his source, thereby positioning himself as her mouthpiece: 'Listen, listen, Maha was telling her story to the stones of the Jordan Valley (p. 4) and: 'Listen, listen, I can still hear her words carried by the breeze' (p. 5). In a sense, he appropriates Maha's voice, replacing it with his own and establishing his own version as the dominant and "real" story, thereby ensuring the survival of his narrative at the expense of her own. By placing Maha's narrative—which also encompasses Um Saad's story—alongside the Storyteller's, this novel starkly displays how men view women as opposed to how women view themselves, in addition to how these male narratives are representative of misogynistic power hierarchies that contribute to the erasure of female voices. The contrasting female narratives reveal, however, that women are able to combat this erasure through constructing their own sense of identity that better reflects their experiences.

Male hegemony in *Pillars of Salt* is established through misogynistic pseudo-religious and cultural beliefs of male superiority. This allows male family members to assume absolute control and authority within the household, especially over the females. For example, Maha recalls her mother's excuses for Daffash's physical abuse of Maha: 'He is a boy. Allah placed him a step higher. We must accept Allah's verdict' (p. 37). His violence is amplified when he perceives that his authority has been flouted— as when Maha refuses to cook for the English at a party organised by Daffash's employer, Daffash beats her almost to death, shouting: 'You are only a woman. Lick my boots, lick the general's boots. Obey your masters' (p. 185). Outside of the family home, the Storyteller reveals how inherent misogyny can be insidiously transmitted through patriarchal narratives with a thinly veiled rant posing as religious didacticism:

> Allah warned his loyal worshippers in His wise book against the cunning of women, especially widows and spinsters. When there is no man to hold the rein, to mount them and drown them in the sea of cooking and children, women start laying snares. They

> whisper their songs in men's ears; they smile, they hiss their spells until they snatch men's souls (p. 178).

Apart from the fact that he does not cite any actual verses from the Qur'an here, thereby rendering this all a matter of opinion rather than actual doctrine, the Storyteller has already established himself as an authority and so his words carry weight with his audience. The need to neutralise women's power is evident here with his references to female cunning and conniving. His proposed solution of sexual subjugation, traditional 'women's work' and childrearing are thus meant to distract women from challenging male authority and voicing their own stories—or, their 'songs' and 'spells'.

One of the important factors that influences how women are portrayed in male narratives in this novel is the inherent eroticism associated with female bodies. The voyeuristic nature of the male gaze is an important theme in *Pillars of Salt*, especially since it influences how women are perceived and subsequently treated. The Storyteller is a prime example: his version of Maha is based purely on his observation of her, and his narrative unwittingly reveals an obsession with her body. For example, he hides to witness the consummation of Harb and Maha's marriage, and he focuses on Maha's 'shining white figure with rounded breasts' (p. 65), describing the sexual encounter in more detail than Maha herself. He even inserts himself into the experience, implying that he also achieves sexual release with reference to his 'sin-stained body' (p. 66). Even when he narrates scenes that are in no way erotic, he cannot help but objectify Maha's body. For instance, when Maha rends her clothes in grief at Harb's death, the Storyteller describes how her breasts appear like 'two soft sunbirds trying to escape the firm chest' (p. 124). In contrast, Maha only ever views her body and especially her breasts in terms of functionality, as a means of feeding her son. In fact, this objective takes precedence over all

else, even her own physical wellbeing; when Daffash beats her, her immediate reaction is to protect her breasts so that she can still feed Mubarak.

This insidious male gaze, formalised in the dominant narratives of the male characters, is also used to justify sexual violence towards women. When confronted by his rape of Maha's friend Nasra, Daffash's trite responses indicate his lack of a sense of accountability: 'She asked for it. Whenever she set her greedy eyes on me […] she tempted me […] She was always playing tunes on her pipe. It called me to touch her' (p. 13). The irony is that he blames her eyes and her pipe for tempting him, when the opposite is true. His gaze on Nasra leads him to build up the vision of her as a temptress and to follow her into an isolated cave and sexually assault her. He is even convinced that she was a willing lover, accusing Nasra: 'You stopped struggling and lay back. You enjoyed it' (p. 13). This pattern is repeated in another of Daffash's sexual encounters: 'It was not rape. She was begging me for it and my manhood did not allow me to let her go without giving her what she asked for' (p. 71). This cycle of victim-blaming and the perception of consent is perpetuated by characters like Daffash and the Storyteller because they are absolved simply because they are men in a man's world.

It is also interesting how female bodies are perceived as shameful, reflecting cultural norms. The Storyteller warns his audience about the 'shameful news' of Maha and Nasra confronting Daffash with a rifle, and before he relays the details of the fertility rite that Maha undergoes, he tells his audience, 'I will tell you the most *shameful* part of our story' (p. 92, added emphasis). In both instances, Maha displays a strength that is deviant or abhorrent. On the other hand, Um Saad is more openly made to feel ashamed of her own body. She is first made aware of her own sexuality by her own father, who forces her to cover from head to toe when she leaves the house, telling her: 'You are not a child anymore. Your breasts are as big as melons' (p. 77). This attitude leads her to build a life-long perception of her body as shameful

and something to hide. Even as an old woman in the asylum, Um Saad is never entirely comfortable within her own body. She clings to small vanities that enhance her looks such as a youthful pink headscarf and takes pride in her smooth skin and long hair. The enforced cloistering and restricted interaction with the outside world that she experiences as a child reflects the cultural perception of women as representatives of family honour, expressed by the common Arabic adage voiced by Um Saad's mother: 'Girls are a worry until you are in the grave' (p. 137).

From his very first mention of her, the Storyteller guides assumptions about Maha by intentionally predisposing the listener/reader to assume the worst of Maha. He mixes analogies and motifs to present her as monstrous and demonic. For example, in the first chapter, he states that 'Maha was a shrew who used to chew the shredded flesh of mortals from sun birth to sun death' (p. 2), and '[h]er restless soul has been haunting the desert for years gone by and will for years to come' (p. 2). The Storyteller inserts similar monstrous and almost Gothic descriptions of Maha elsewhere in the novel; he calls her a she-demon (p. 30), a ghoul (p. 93) and a hyena that cries tears of blood (p. 123) although his favourite moniker for her seems to be the 'black widow'. The Storyteller depicts Maha as a conniving witch who has placed spells on Harb and her father to get her way and who conspires with the village women against the men. The Storyteller also links Maha to damnation through associating her with the story of Lot's wife with his very first description of Maha as 'the damned woman who turns whatever she treads on to basalt […] Allah, His angels, His trumpets and His insatiable hell turn whatever Maha touches into waste' (pp. 1-2). The theme of female-incurred doom and damnation recurs throughout the Storyteller's episodes and is predominantly linked to the cursed land and biblical/Islamic motifs of retribution such as pillars of salt and mighty earthquakes.

The Storyteller's misogyny is also revealed in how he portrays the oppressive men in Maha's life in a positive light and as victims of women. In his narrative, Daffash is a noble young man, a good son and brother, who is sorely tried by his errant sister and her evil machinations. Interestingly, the Storyteller makes no mention of the asylum, replacing Maha's confrontation with Daffash and her subsequent incarceration with an elaborate Gothic tale that positions Daffash as a hero battling his monstrous sister. In this drawn-out adventure, the Storyteller portrays Maha as a demonic seductress who targets Samir Pasha, Daffash's employer, for wealth and power, providing strikingly detailed descriptions of the sensuous vampiric encounters between the two, as well as Maha's numerous unearthly transformations. Another male character who is portrayed as a victim is the watchman, Raai. He is the Storyteller's main source of information on Maha, and he is portrayed by the Storyteller as constantly terrorised by the horrors he witnesses in Maha's life. Most notably, the Storyteller ascribes a loss of fertility to Raai when he prevents Maha and her mother from committing nefarious acts and when he supposedly witnesses Maha transforming into a ghoul. On the other hand, in Maha's narrative, Raai is depicted as a scandalmonger, there only to police the women who are aware of his shortcomings: 'We laughed at Raai's jumpy walk and his cowardly heart' (p. 205). With these two contrasting versions of the same character, we see how Maha, powerful and nonconforming, is demonised by the men in her community and to the extent that she is perceived as ghoulish and emasculating.

Pillars of Salt portrays the fate of powerful women when they are deemed insubordinate by the men around them. Maha is the epitome of fierce protectiveness. She is unafraid to voice her opinions to her brother and father, especially against injustice and in defence of others such as Nasra, who has no family to keep her safe. When Harb leaves to fight the English, she wishes she could fight alongside and protect him, but her culturally and socially prescribed role means

she is forced to wait at home. Although she does not actively set out to challenge male authority, the strength of Maha's convictions does not allow her to stay silent. In such cases, the punitive measures enacted by the figures of male authority in her life are traumatic and lead to the loss of her sense of agency and dignity that are underscored by her physical pain. For example, Daffash beats her so badly for refusing to cook for the English—the colonisers who killed her husband—that she loses her front teeth. Maha asks herself:

> Why couldn't I defend myself? Why couldn't I hit back? Why couldn't I pluck out his eyes? I choked because my throat was full of blood and tears. Why couldn't I punch him in the nose? Anger and humiliation were bubbling inside me. The yell I uttered whirled in the village, rattling closed windows, waking babies and shaking bolted doors (p. 176).

Maha's inability to physically and verbally fight back or even defend herself are indicative of the pervasive power of the patriarchy. Although she refuses to be a victim, as a woman, she is helpless in the face of dominant power differentials. After she is kicked and stomped on by her brother's 'master's boot' (p. 174) for humiliating him and challenging his authority, she is only left with her trauma—and her voice. Yet this voice is powerful in its own right if she but realises it; her yell has the power to rattle the locked windows and doors that cage women within the paradigm of the obedient silent daughter, sister or wife and to awaken future generations. Maha is later mocked for her missing teeth by the men of the village, and this perpetuates her feeling of humiliation. Even years later in the asylum, she covers her mouth with her hand when she smiles, trying to hide the physical reminder of her trauma.

Pillars of Salt draws attention to the importance of marginalised spaces that mirror female experiences and allow for different modes of self-expression. The theme of confinement in this novel, both literal and figurative, is depicted by the spaces of the home and the asylum. On the one hand, the narratives of Maha and Um Saad reveal that they are painfully aware of the gender roles and societal expectations that impose restrictions and, in a sense, imprison the women

within their homes. On the other, the asylum is linked to systematic patriarchal oppression and the weaponising of female insanity, leading to Maha and Um Saad's involuntary commitment, ostensibly for their own good but, in actuality, as a punitive measure. Additionally, the asylum provides a space that allows for self-expression in ways that the outside world does not.

Despite the differences in rural and urban settings in *Pillars of Salt*, the cultural conventions and rules of conduct that women must follow are almost identical. For example, Maha refuses to meet Harb alone at night, stating: 'For a girl to be out at night is a crime of honour. They will shoot me between the eyes' (p. 11), and Um Saad is beaten by her father until she loses consciousness when he discovers she has met with a man in secret. In keeping with Arab cultural norms of women as upholders of family honour, both women are expected to remain virtuous and "pure". For Maha, a jarring example is made of Nasra after Daffash rapes her: she is blamed and Daffash is absolved of all responsibility, leading Maha to state her realisation of 'how high were the mud walls imprisoning us' (p. 14).[31] She is also aware of her father's belief that '[a] woman's place was in a well-closed room' (p. 22) and that he considers her working in the fields shameful, yet a necessary evil. The same perceptions of family honour and societal norms exist within Um Saad's urban setting. As a young girl, she is expected to wear black robes that cover her from head to toe outside of her home. Her father also stops her from going to school when she starts to physically mature, restricting her movement outside the house, and physically abusing her when she dares to even look outside a window. After she marries, she claims 'the kitchen was my domain, my space' (p. 160), even sleeping on the kitchen floor when her husband takes a second wife and unceremoniously ejects her from the marital bedroom. However, this domain is another prison: she is shackled by societal and

[31] Maha and even Nasra herself constantly repeat the idea that, as a result of the rape, Nasra is to be pitied since she will never marry or have her own children (p. 60, p. 71, p. 81, p. 126 and p. 153).

cultural expectations of her as a wife and mother, constantly cooking, cleaning, birthing and rearing eight sons and satisfying her husband's sexual needs. In her cynical view, men perceive women in terms of sexual functionality: 'we are just vaginas. That is how men see us. That is what men care about' (p. 169).

For both women, the home thus becomes synonymous with patriarchal control and is the site of labour and servitude. In fact, Maha always uses the same analogy to describe her home village, that of a leech clinging to the mountainside (p. 72, p. 100, p. 127, p. 183 and p. 236), which reflects how fulfilling her expected role within her family and community makes her feel used and drained. At turns, she describes the village as lazy (p. 72), forgotten (p. 100 and p. 127), blind (p. 127) and thick-skinned (p. 183), again revealing her complex relationship to home. Um Saad similarly anthropomorphises Amman, calling it absent-minded and referring to its acute memory loss (p. 138) and black heart (p. 160), showing just how forgotten and bleak she feels within this space.

The oppressive and destructive connotations of home force the women in *Pillars of Salt* to look beyond for a space that reflects their experiences: a counter-space that allows for the disruption of normative societal constructs and the challenging of authority. Sinno, alluding to Virginia Woolf's seminal work, makes the argument that both Maha and Um Saad do not have access to rooms of their own and so must construct and appropriate spaces, leading to the intricate binding of self and nation.[32] Furthermore, in her analysis of Faqir's novels, Moore discusses how the trope of home as a prison and/or asylum in Arab Muslim contexts draws attention to 'the heterotopic nature of the marginal space'.[33] Foucault conceptualises heterotopias as counter-spaces that are completely different and opposed to all others and that

[32] Sinno, 2011, p. 71.
[33] Moore, 2008, p. 107.

efface, neutralise or purify them.[34] He contrasts heterotopias of crisis and deviation; the former are privileged, sacred or forbidden places originally found in primitive societies that are generally reserved for those undergoing a 'biological crisis' in relation to their society, such as pregnant women.[35] Heterotopias of deviation, on the other hand, are spaces where 'individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed', such as psychiatric hospitals.[36] Both kinds of spaces are depicted in *Pillars of Salt.* The asylum performs the doubled function of a heterotopia of crisis and deviation as it is used as a punitive measure for the women's perceived transgressions, but it is also a space wherein the women cope with their trauma. On the other hand, for Maha, the Dead Sea and surrounding area is her refuge in moments of crisis, while the Castle Mountain in Amman performs the same role for Um Saad.

The asylum in *Pillars of Salt* is already a complex space in that it reflects postcolonial anxieties but it is also important to first consider in terms of the theme of female insanity that features in this and so many other texts by Arab women writers. As Maha and Um Saad are both labelled madwomen, it is necessary to understand how this influences the voicing of their experiences, especially considering they both function as narrators in this novel. Abudi claims that, 'madness serves as a metaphor for female victimization on the one hand, and for female resistance on the other'.[37] Similarly, Manisty argues that Arab women writers symbolically empower the figure of the madwoman by allowing her to narrate her own story from the centre rather than the margins, with female characters and narrators who 'dismantle the patriarchal premise which links woman's voice to madness by positing an alternative premise which

---

[34] Anthony Vidler and Michel Foucault, 'Heterotopias', trans. by Pamela Johnston, *AA Files*, 69, 2014, 18–22, p. 20.
[35] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22–27 <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>, p. 24.
[36] Foucault, 1986, p. 24.
[37] Abudi, 2010, p. 230.

equates woman's voice with truth'.[38] As madwomen, the narratives of Maha and Um Saad would typically be disregarded, yet these narratives are positioned in opposition to the dominant male narrative of the Storyteller in *Pillars of Salt*. Both women are victims of the dominant patriarchal hierarchy that confined them to the asylum and technically silenced them by labelling them insane. However, by voicing their stories, Maha and Um Saad challenge that authority, becoming representatives of female resistance and purveyors of the truth.[39]

The asylum is, first and foremost, a place of punishment for women who have demonstrated deviant behaviour: they have challenged male authority and maintained their own power of agency. In fact, the—by now stereotypical—view on women, their bodies and hysteria or mental instability is established by Daffash very early on in the novel. Maha confronts him at gunpoint about raping Nasra, but he is able to get control of the gun and he threatens to kill both women, calling them 'crazy whores'. However, his father stops him and Daffash brushes off his intended violence towards the women: '"I wanted to put some sense into those crazy women's heads." He tapped his belly and burst out laughing' (p. 14). This scene demonstrates the association between women's bodies, minds and sexuality. Women who fight back are labelled 'crazy', and as the female reproductive system is perceived as the intrinsic and inevitable cause of female insanity, sexual promiscuity seems to be another byproduct of insanity. This comes full circle at the end of the novel when, in the final confrontation between Maha and Daffash, he states: 'I don't talk to women. No brain and no faith' (p. 232). Interestingly, Daffash's statement about women's lack of brain and faith is echoed by the

[38] Manisty, 1994, p. 155.

[39] Interestingly, Nasra is also perceived as a madwoman due to her nonconformity: she is a shepherdess who occupies an ambiguous role within her society—she does not seem to have any family and she has freedom and mobility as she wanders with her sheep and seems to live alone. Furthermore, she has a form of learning disorder that impacts her speech, and so she resorts to her music and pipes to express her feelings and thoughts. Nonetheless, she is Maha's stalwart companion and helps her through each of her crises. She speaks truth, whether using her words or her music, in what can be perceived as a form of deviant voicing.

Storyteller and is based on a commonly misquoted and misunderstood *hadith* from the Prophet Mohammad. In Islam, being of sound mind is one of the main conditions for religious accountability, and so a misogynistic reading of the religious text misinterprets women as mentally deficient or insane. In one fell swoop, by perpetuating this myth of female mental incompetence, Daffash discredits Maha, reaffirms his authority as her male guardian and uses the construct of insanity to punish her for challenging that authority.

Unlike the more complex reasons for Maha's confinement to the asylum, Um Saad seems to be punished simply for her continued opposition to her husband's second marriage. No longer the silent, obedient wife, she vocally and physically rages at him and the new woman who suddenly occupies her bedroom in her stead. Already trapped in a loveless marriage and the kitchen, she eventually decides to leave the house, but her husband and the "men in white" find her sleeping in the yard of a mosque and she is once more trapped when they place the straitjacket on her: 'Without my hands, I am not even worth a piastre. When they tied the sleeves [of the straitjacket], I could neither talk nor walk. I could not do anything. I was like a hooded falcon: blind, unable to fly. I was used to having free active hands' (p. 221). Um Saad's sense of self-worth is linked to her ability to be productive as she has only ever been valued in terms of fulfilling the needs of others. The association between her body and voice is also in evidence here: confining her body silences her almost as much as does the diagnosis of insanity.

As a heterotopia of crisis, the asylum helps foster and strengthen bonds between the female characters. Maha soothes Um Saad when she is first admitted, mimicking how her friend Nasra once healed her after she was beaten, and this initiates a bond between the women by perpetuating that cycle of female solidarity. Despite their differences, Maha and Um Saad recognise each other because they are both in crisis, leading them to form a connection based on their shared predicaments. As Sinno says, 'they are isolated from and ostracized by the

outside world, abandoned and rejected by members of their families, and subjected to invasive medical treatments at the hospital'.[40] The asylum might elucidate fear and despair, but by establishing such a connection, Maha and Um Saad are able to temporarily appropriate the asylum room as a female counter-space wherein they can express themselves in ways that they have been unable to before. As Moore explains, the 'gynosocial setting of the asylum room' is a place in which collaborative storytelling takes place, countering the Storyteller's version of events.[41] The women's stories—or trauma narratives—challenge the dominant discourse that labels them insane. Sinno argues that *Pillars of Salt* advocates the premise of an inclusive women's solidarity, one whereby women are encouraged to 'take care of each other anytime, anywhere'.[42] This is most needed in the asylum as Maha and Um Saad navigate their pain while caring for one another as sisters-in-arms.

Pillars of Salt portrays how shared female identity, space and history strengthens women on both an individual and community level, especially through the motif of spinning or weaving. Maha inherits a rug from her mother, who tells her: 'Your grandmother Sabha spun the first thread. Please complete what your grandmother and I have started' (p. 17). The rug symbolises a powerful matriarchal legacy and lineage that Maha takes pride in through constantly referring to herself in terms of her mother and grandmother. This legacy is an important part of Maha's characterisation, as she draws on it to form her own sense of identity: 'I, Maha, daughter of Maliha, daughter of Sabha' (p. 6). She repeatedly refers to her matriarchal line, which is significant in a society that favours patronymic lineage and names—even Maha's father refers

[40] Sinno, 2011, p. 68.
[41] Lindsey Moore, 'Space, Embodiment, Identity and Resistance in the Novels of Fadia Faqir', in *Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*, ed. by Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 246-268, p. 258.
[42] Sinno, 2011, p. 85.

to her as being her mother's daughter.[43] This points to the shared experiences of mother and daughter and the transference of female history from one generation to another. The story of Maha is also the story of her mother, her grandmother and all the women that came before them. The rug becomes a physical reminder of that matriarchal line, connecting her with her mother in an almost visceral sense, as she claims, '[my mother's] life, her fingers, her skin were spun into this magnificent carpet' (p. 115). Maha is thus guided by the wisdom of the matriarchs of her family, especially in terms of social and cultural norms; she attempts to follow in their footsteps through emulating the qualities that she herself considers important, for example, she states: 'I was a bedouin woman, free like a swallow and as courageous as my grandmother Sabha' (p. 15).

Nonetheless, despite the matriarchal legacy of the rug, Maha's spinning is not considered woman's work here and is often criticised. Initially, it is seen an almost self-indulgent hobby that she is only allowed to work on after she has fulfilled her other household responsibilities. Other characters always stop her from spinning, such as her father, 'the master interrupter' (p. 17), and her mother-in-law, Tamam, who views it as nonsense. Perhaps this negative perception is due to the spinning and weaving of a decorative rug is not considered real work in a rural agricultural setting, but it could also be linked to the superstitious perceptions of spinning. For example, Tamam tells Maha that to do so on the night of her engagement is a bad omen (p. 27), and when Maha tries to spin during the second day of her father's funeral, Tamam tells her, 'You are not supposed to be working […] You will make the angels angry' (p. 196).[44] Even the

[43] Ironically, there is always some kind of confusion about Maha and Maliha: the Storyteller at the beginning states that people could not tell one from the other (p. 4) and this happens at more than one point. When Nimer's mind wanders, he always calls Maha by her mother's name and, when he is dying, he starts to reminisce about their wedding (p. 187).

[44] It is ironic that Tamam, one of the village matriarchs, is most antipathetic to Maha's spinning of the rug, especially as she seems to be generally supportive of Maha. Tamam's attitude could point to the cultural stereotype of the antagonistic mother-in-law who is overly critical for no apparent reason, or she simply might not understand the importance of this legacy to Maha.

Storyteller has an opinion on the matter, associating Maha's spinning with witchcraft: 'She used to spin and recite spells all night long' (p. 30) and '[s]he spread her mother's carpet and started spinning and casting spells' (p. 62). For Maha, spinning the rug is simply an act of love, connecting her to her loved ones and protecting them. She states: 'The number of threads I managed to produce were enough to cover our hazy valley; enough to reach Harb wherever he was and even enough to reach my mother' (p. 73), and, '[m]y threads spread over the valley to protect it from aggressive assaulters, from the forgetful sun and the raids of enemies' (p. 112).

One of the main ways in which the rug allows Maha to retain a connection to her maternal lineage is through its connection to female storytelling. The physical acts of weaving and spinning themselves are associated with patterns of speech and silence in this novel. Maha describes the process of connecting the existing and new threads of the rug then hitting the pattern into place in terms of sound: 'Silence, click then bang. Silence, click then bang' (p. 113). The intermingling of silence and sound, linking the past to the present and building a structure therefore forms a cohesive whole, a rug—or a narrative. This is further indicated by Maha's lament from the asylum: 'My mother's carpet is still unfinished. Not one single word from my lips' (p. 240). The physical threads that Maha weaves can be seen as manifestations of her story, a story that her grandmother and mother entrusted to her, to carry on the legacy. Yet, imprisoned within the asylum and without the means to compose her story, Maha is silenced and unable to complete her task. The implication is that while these female stories are passed down and immortalised, they are also often cut short or interrupted. Maha's rug thus represents both her words and silences, a story about herself and those who came before her. From a different angle, the motif of spinning is also linked to the male voice with the Storyteller's view of himself as a 'yarn spinner'. Moore argues that the Storyteller can be seen as a rival yarn-spinner, an

outsider who nonetheless represents local and regional authority.[45] His narrative is thus the one more likely to be heard and passed down.

The association between spinning, telling tales and female heritage appears in other instances in the novel. For example, after the death of her father, Maha's home becomes a refuge of sorts: 'The women of the village considered my house their house and they came very [*sic*] afternoon, carrying their embroidery, spinning, weaving and stories. They would […] weave colourful rugs and unload the burdens of their hearts' (p. 207). The act of storytelling shifts here to the realm of the female—the absence of a male authority figure in the home transforms it into an inclusive female-only space that allows the women the freedom to voice and construct their own stories. This contrasts with the previous perception of the home as an oppressive space. The stereotype of women's work is subverted here and becomes the vehicle for self-expression; by speaking their problems and experiences, the women are also able to seek help and comfort from their sisters. The strength of these bonds is most evident when Maha confronts Daffash about his false claim on the farm. The women unite and stand together against patriarchal oppression, but unfortunately, it is not enough, and they are beaten down.

Pillars of Salt challenges the dominance of patriarchal and Orientalist narratives about women by providing a powerful counter-narrative that reveals women who, despite being silenced or choosing silence, speak for themselves and their own experiences. Faqir subtly subverts the elements of oral storytelling in the novel to critique the traditional paradigm that seems to privilege male voices. This preoccupation with redefining the role of women as storytellers is also evident in her own contribution to *In the House of Silence*, 'Stories from the House of Songs', in which Faqir envisages a modern-age Shahrazad as an Arab woman writer

[45] Moore, 2013, p. 259.

who refuses to let her voice be distorted or silenced by the conservative patriarchal regime and so eventually chooses exile and a different language to safeguard the integrity of that voice.[46] Along these lines, Wael Mustafa argues that Arab women diasporic writers 'attempt to reinvigorate the Scheherazade paradigm that enables them to create diasporic female identities with split in-transit subjectivities vacillating between irreconcilable cultures and power relations'.[47] Characters like Maha and Um Saad experience a form of diaspora in that they are exiled from their homes and forced to remain in the asylum, where they face cultural displacement and a power system that is symbolic of the colonial presence in the country. It is in this exile that they finally tell their tales.

The Storyteller's ending of Maha's tale reveals further parallels with the paradigm of Shahrazad and *The Thousand and One Nights* while also perpetuating the myths of patriarchal and colonial superiority through his apocalyptic vision of the doomed Arab village and Maha's fairytale happily-ever-after. In this version, rather than the restoration of patriarchal authority at home and in the asylum, the Storyteller depicts the utter annihilation of Maha's village and her miraculous survival with her son. A king from a far-off land rescues her and carries her away to his magic castle:

> Like her grandmother Sabha, she fell in love with a stranger, an occupier, an invader. The majestic crusader was surrounded by an entourage of two hundred black slaves and one hundred slave girls […] The strong white king fell a victim to […] the black widow […] Another casualty of the pagan, bedouin eyes (p. 243).

As well as the strong imperialistic and Orientalist overtones, this closely mirrors certain details from *The Thousand and One* Nights such as the number of black and white male and female slaves. Furthermore, the reference to Maha's grandmother (whose backstory is never mentioned

---

[46] Fadia Faqir, 'Stories from the House of Songs', in *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. by Fadia Faqir, trans. by Shirley Eber (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 51–61, p. 53.

[47] Wael Mustafa, 'Scheherazade Unbowed: Muslim Arab Women Diaspoetics in Fadia Faqir's *The Cry of the Dove* (2007)', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63.3 (2022), 257–68 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2021.2006597>, p. 267.

in the novel) is an indication of the recurrence of the meeting of native matrilineal history with patriarchal colonial power. The Storyteller also describes the fantastical castle that Maha lives in with her husband atop a mountain in the final part of his story, which implies hers is a happy ending. However, he ends his story on a bleak note: 'The sound of Maha and the sight of the pinnacles are as frail as the spider's web. A puff of air or tiny drops of rain could kill the spider and destroy his thready shelter […] Soon, we shall all perish...' (p. 244). This reference to the transient nature of life seems to imply that Maha's story is a fantasy that can easily be dispelled and dissipated, belying her actual ending as an inmate in the asylum with no hope for release. His vision of Maha's fairytale ending conveniently masks the ignoble and unknown future of women who are punished for speaking up and raging against the injustice of the system. On another level, this metaphor of impermanence also can also be understood as symbolic of the death of the storyteller whose story continues to live on.

The three narratives in *Pillars of Salt* can be seen to reflect Faqir's views on Arab women writers' preoccupation with self-representation, especially considering how the two autobiographical narratives of Maha and Um Saad are contrasted with the Storyteller's male-constructed biography. This is also evident in what Abdo labels 'revisionist mythmaking', the unearthing of women's experiences that constitutes a retelling of androcentric narratives, 'whether these be orientalist, colonialist, mythological, historical, political or social'.[48] Ultimately, *Pillars of Salt* revolves around these retellings and the complexity of the storyteller's voice. Considering the audiences of each narrator is just as important as the those of the novel as a whole. The Storyteller hijacks Maha's story and makes it his own—he injects himself into the tale both as a character hiding in the shadows and as a narrator with his own vision. On the other hand, Um Saad speaks her story directly to Maha and only Maha. This

[48] Abdo, 2009, p. 243.

leads to the intriguing question of the recipients of Maha's story. The text positions her tale as a series of flashbacks, but Maha is actually narrating those flashbacks, which begs the question of who is she talking to? Furthermore, her narrative is positioned as a counterpoint to the Storyteller's own version, but there is no indication that she is aware of his story, let alone actually heard it. So, how is her story transmitted? Is it the author who hears and writes down Maha's words? Or is there an editor—an anonymous character—who has collected these narratives into a novel? Furthermore, considering the women's narratives emerge from the asylum, can the voices of Maha and Um Saad as so-called madwomen truly be heard? These questions remain open to interpretation and conjecture.

Chapter Five

Iron-Jawed Women: Hiding behind Silence in *Mornings in Jenin*

Mornings in Jenin by Susan Abulhawa is a multi-generational story depicting the love, heartbreak, loss, oppression and hope experienced by one Palestinian family as they navigate a world ripped apart by occupation. Incorporating both fiction and fact in this novel about the Israeli occupation of Palestine, Abulhawa portrays multiple points of view, revealing the ripple effects of trauma on characters, whether Palestinian or Israeli. There is a clear connection between female silence and trauma in this novel: silence is a coping mechanism, a way to internalise the catastrophic or the tragic and distance oneself from the pain and devastation of that trauma. This silence influences the communicative process as it leads to detachment or dissociation, resulting in an emotionally and psychologically absent mother who cannot show maternal love and a daughter who unconsciously mimics and takes up the mother's silence.

While *Mornings in Jenin* is primarily a story about a family and the strong bonds that are tested through the crucible of war and displacement, it is also a story about identity. Facing a military colonial occupation that uproots them from their land and life as they know it, the characters are forced to acclimatise to this new world order even as they cling to the hope of return. I will thus indicate how, as an example of Palestinian diasporic literature, the novel explores the complexities of Palestinian identity while also indicating the intersectionality and hybridisation of that identity. This is also aided by the novel's dialogic and polyphonic elements, with its varied forms of discourse, multiple narrative points of view and the intermingling of numerous voices. I will also indicate how the novel melds history and narrative to enact a national allegory through its depiction and mirroring of individual and collective experiences of trauma. This functions to critique the dominant Israeli (colonial) narrative while

also underscoring the humanity of the characters, whether Palestinian or Israeli, especially with the use of what Nina Fischer labels 'disruptive empathy'.[1]

With the propensity for trauma theory to overlook the effects of the Nakba and similar Palestinian experiences of trauma, I will consider how Abulhawa's representation of Palestinian trauma in *Mornings in Jenin* offers a new reading of trauma narratives, especially in terms of the novel's exploration of voice and identity in the face of the devastation of war and displacement. Such a reading reflects what Craps labels 'an inclusive and culturally sensitive trauma theory that acts as 'a catalyst for meaningful change' and 'can expose situations of injustice and abuse, and open up ways to imagine a different global future'.[2] I will apply this approach to my analysis of the female characters in particular as they are influenced by both the existing Palestinian patriarchal power dynamics and the oppression and violence of the military occupation regime, leading to trauma reactions that change how they interact and communicate with others. The novel portrays women such as Dalia and Amal who become 'iron-jawed' and hide behind walls of silence that both protect and distance them—silence essentially becomes a by-product of their trauma and represents a form of dissociation.[3] By tracing the evolution of this iron-jawed silence, I will illustrate how the breaking of generational silence becomes a necessary part of healing trauma, reclaiming memory and restoring the self in the novel.

---

[1] Nina Fischer, 'Entangled Suffering and Disruptive Empathy: The Holocaust, the Nakba and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*', *Memory Studies*, 15.4 (2020), 1–18 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698019896850>, p. 3.

[2] Craps, 2013, p. 8.

[3] Balaev links 'pathological dissociation' to silence, suggesting an innate causality between trauma and dissociation, whereby 'an extreme experience directly produces a dissociative consciousness wherein the truth of the past is hidden' (2014, p. 3, p. 5).

Mornings in Jenin is a novel about loss: loss of land; loss of family and loved ones; and loss of identity and voice. The novel spans four generations of the Abulheja family, starting with the family patriarch in 1941 Palestine and ending with his great-granddaughter in present-day 2003 in the United States of America. It is set against the backdrop of the Palestinian Nakba (Great Catastrophe) of 1948, the Naksa (Disaster) of 1967 and other well-documented historical events, depicting the trauma of a people forced out of their homes and off their land by the Israeli military occupation, thus becoming refugees in their own country and later forced into exile in different countries.[4] *Mornings in Jenin* is structured around these central events, portraying how each generation navigates their understanding of what it means to be Palestinian in the face of catastrophic and disastrous change by weaving in the viewpoints of different characters and allowing multiple voices to be heard.

The main storyline of the novel centres on Dalia and Hasan Abulheja, living in the Palestinian village of Ein Hod in the 1940s. Shortly after the birth of their second son, Ismael, the entire village is rounded up by the occupation at gunpoint and, like so many Palestinians at the time, the Abulhejas and their neighbours are forced to make an impossible choice: leave their homes and possessions or be executed by the occupying Zionist forces.[5] In the chaos and crush of bodies being forced out of the village, Ismael is plucked from Dalia's arms. Dalia never sees her son again and never finds out what happened to him, and this perhaps makes his loss

---

[4] Ahmad Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 109.

[5] It is necessary to differentiate between the terms used in the novel to denote the occupiers in Palestine. See: Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Zionism started as a European nationalist movement but later became a colonial one after, 'its leaders decided to implement their vision of a national revival in Palestine' (p. 35). The term "Zionist" thus refers to the occupiers intent on establishing a Jewish state in Palestine and dispelling its people while "Israeli" refers to a citizen of the state of Israel. In this novel, the former term is used more often before and during the initial period of the occupation. Furthermore, as the political ideology of Zionism does not necessarily align with the religious doctrines of Judaism, the use of the term Zionist is preferred over 'Jewish', circumventing any claims of religious persecution or antisemitism. With the contestation of the legitimacy of Israel as a nation, many Arabs prefer to use the term Zionist over Israeli.

harder to bear than if she had been faced with his actual death. The Abulheja family seek refuge in a camp near Jenin. While both Hasan and Dalia are devastated by the loss of their son, it arguably has the most significant impact on Dalia's life: she never recovers from his disappearance, slowly withdrawing from her family and life and taking refuge in silence. The family is forced to acclimatise to their new reality of being refugees as the occupation continues and their dreams of return slowly diminish. Dalia and her husband have another child, Amal, a daughter who is a symbol of hope for the family (as her name indicates). Unbeknownst to them all, Ismael lives under the name of David, kidnapped and adopted by Moshe, an Israeli soldier, and his wife. Unaware of his origins, David ironically becomes a soldier who perpetuates the violence against Palestinians, unwittingly beating and torturing his own brother, Yousef. As the years pass, the three siblings' lives diverge, and each takes a different path as they try to build their lives despite the pain and losses of their past. After her father goes missing and her mother dies, Amal travels first to Jerusalem and then to the United States to study, later joining her brother, Yousef, and his family in the refugee camp of Shatila in Lebanon, where she gets married. Pregnant and concerned about the increasing violence, Amal returns to the United States to arrange for her family to follow, but her husband, sister-in-law and niece are all killed before she can do so. She remains in diaspora and raises her daughter, Sara, while Yousef becomes a fighter with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) to retaliate for his and his family's suffering at the hands of the Israeli soldiers. Years later, David discovers his true origins and is eventually able to track down Amal. Together, they are able to piece together the fractured pieces of their past. Returning to Palestine after years of exile with Sara, Amal reconnects with that past with both her daughter and brother but is caught up once again in the violence of the war and killed by an Israeli soldier.

This portrayal of the multi-generational Palestinian experience of occupation, displacement and violence marks this novel very clearly as a trauma narrative. The Nakba, in particular, has been engraved on Palestinian and Arab memory as a destructive turning point in the history of the region. In fact, Masalha refers to the 1948 war as a rupture, indicating how the ethnic cleansing of Palestine is 'central to both the Palestinian society of today and Palestinian social history and collective identity'.[6] However, despite this, Rosemary Sayigh points out how the Palestinian Nakba remains glaringly absent from the field of trauma studies, which she claims raises questions about 'the extent to which racism and Western ethnocentrism have entered into the genre's orientations'.[7] This is a salient viewpoint considering the history of trauma theory, which 'developed out of an engagement with Holocaust testimony, literature, and history'.[8] Therefore, the analysis of how trauma is represented in novels like *Mornings in Jenin*, especially in terms of the impact of silence and voicing trauma, can contribute to a more globalised or, as Craps labels it, 'decolonised' trauma theory.[9]

Palestinian literature exists in a peculiar state of tension between colonialism and postcolonialism as Palestine has never truly been 'decolonised'. This is due to the continued presence of a coloniser in Palestine from the advent of British Mandate rule in 1922 to the present day. The withdrawal of the British Mandate from Palestine in 1948 was almost simultaneously accompanied by the Zionist military occupation that eventually established the state of Israel on Palestinian lands. Most notable was the implementation of the military blueprint entitled Plan D in 1948, the objective of which was to rid the future Jewish state of as many Palestinians as possible, paving the way for the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians through

---

[6] Nur Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (London: Zed Books, 2012), p. 1.
[7] Rosemary Sayigh, 'On the Exclusion of the Palestinian Nakba from the "Trauma Genre"', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 43.1 (2013), 51–60 <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2013.43.1.51>, pp. 52-53.
[8] Craps, 2013, p. 3.
[9] Craps, 2013, p. 8.

numerous massacres.[10] This cataclysmic Nakba resulted in 'the loss of well over 70 percent of the territory of Mandate Palestine, the destruction of more than five hundred villages, the scattering of upward of three-quarters of a million refugees across at least six countries (in fact, the world), and the decimation of their political life'.[11] Benny Morris traces the further processes that made the possibility of a mass refugee return virtually inconceivable, such as 'the cultivation or destruction of Arab fields […] and the settlement of Jewish immigrants in empty Arab housing in the countryside.[12] These deterrents for return are depicted in *Mornings in Jenin*, for example, when the patriarch of the Abulheja family makes the trek from the refugee camp of Jenin back to his farm five years after being forced out, only to find the village of Ein Hod inhabited by Jewish settlers. When he returns a second time, he is shot dead by Israeli soldiers for trespassing. This occupation is still present over 73 years later, and what has been dubbed the "Middle East question" and the "Israeli-Palestinian conflict" remains a global source of controversy and contention to this day.[13]

The classification of Palestinian literature as purely postcolonial can be problematic without a clear understanding of what is meant by "postcolonial" in this context. Bill Ashcroft *et al.* explain what the term has now come to mean:

> 'Postcolonialism/post-colonialism' is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of Empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps,

---

[10] Pappé, 2006, pp. 129-30. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNWRA) reports in 2023 that 5.9 million Palestinians are currently registered as refugees (https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136662).

[11] Mark LeVine and Gershon Shafir, 'A State Is Born; A Nation Is Dispersed', in *Struggle and Survival in Palestine/Israel*, ed. by Mark LeVine and Gershon Shafir (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp.154-58, p.154.

[12] Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p, 341.

[13] The use of the term "conflict" is considered misleading and a misnomer by many due to the discrepancy in political and military power between the two sides. This reflects the subtle biases that often accompany the representation of Palestinian experiences of violence and oppression and the denial of their right of return.

> the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre- and post-independence nations and communities.[14]

Mornings in Jenin can be seen to enact this last concept of postcolonialism as it not only explores the dimensions of identity or subject construction but also challenges colonial discourse—in this case, the dominant Israeli narrative that attempts to control the representation and perception of the occupation and both figuratively and literally erase Palestinian identity. This is evident in how Abulhawa is cognizant of the importance of writing and voicing Palestinian experiences and providing a counter-narrative, as she explains in an interview:

> There is a new generation of writers who have lived most of their lives in the West and we are telling our story, finally, in our own voice and in Western languages. It has been Israel's narrative that has dominated literature until recently [...] They also told the story that the West wanted to hear. It was easier to hear a story of a land without a people.[15]

Thus, in writing this novel, Abulhawa challenges the Zionist slogan of 'a land without a people for a people without a land', the inaccurate platitude that legitimised their quest for statehood, through depicting the history and trauma of the colonised Palestinian people through the Abulheja family who, while fictional, still embody the hopes and fears of their real counterparts. Furthermore, Fouad Mami argues that postcolonialism in this novel 'emerges from the intensity of its contestation against colonial policies and how these policies are enmeshed in the power structures set by the imperial project', claiming that it 'registers as an anti-conquest narrative, providing a socio-political perspective for the colonized'.[16] This is evident, for example, in how the novel depicts the characters' bleak experiences of Zionist displacement strategies, the

---

[14] 'Postcolonialism/Post-Colonialism', in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 204–9, p. 205.
[15] Olivia Snaije, 'The Many Lives and Languages of a Palestinian Novel', *Publishing Perspectives*, 21 March 2012.
[16] Fouad Mami, 'Postcolonial Predicaments: Encumbering the Emancipatory Potential in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63.1 (2020), 14–27 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1799742>, p. 15, p. 16.

evolution of refugee camps, military-enforced curfews and checkpoints and the various identification and permission papers needed by Palestinians to travel within their own country.

The elements of Palestinian postcolonial literature in the novel thus emphasise the relationship between narrative and history. Fredric Jameson claims that Third World texts 'project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*'.[17] More specifically, Anna Bernard argues that biographical form and the demographic imaginary in Palestinian literature, 'can be understood as a specific incarnation of national allegory'.[18] She states:

> [I]t is a conjoining of private and public that functions […] as both a reading and a writing practice [..] as readers, we expect the representation of the state/citizen bind to have something to do with religious and ethnic identity – and it describes the means through which literary texts are able to "imagine" a present or future Palestinian, Israeli, or shared nation-state.[19]

Extrapolating this to *Mornings in Jenin*, it can be seen to function as a Palestinian national allegory in terms of how 'biographical' individual experiences map onto the 'demographic imaginary' of collective historical events or concepts of national belonging. Within this paradigm, for example, Moshe's kidnapping of Ismael to raise him as his own mirrors the Israeli occupation of Palestine to establish a state of its own. This kind of allegory functions to posit questions about national identity as well as critique the dominant occupier narrative. For instance, Khaled AlKodimi explores Abulhawa's use of metaphor to expose the reality of the situation in Palestine, suggesting that by depicting 'the agony of her fragmented nation under Israeli hegemony and aggression', Abulhawa justifies Palestinian resistance against Israel and

---

[17] Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15, 1986, 65–88 <https://doi.org/10.2307/466493>, p. 69 (author's emphasis)
[18] Anna Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration and Israel/Palestine* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013) <https://doi.org/10.5949/liverpool/9781846319433.001.0001>, p. 48.
[19] Bernard, 2013, p. 48.

uncovers 'the illusion created by the Israeli and western media that portrays Palestinians as mere terrorists'.[20] Therefore, the intermingling of the personal and the public and the individual and the collective point to the necessity and significance of representing a national identity.

Any consideration of *Mornings in Jenin*—or, indeed, any Palestinian narrative—must factor in the role of displacement as it directly impacts the understanding of what comprises Palestinian identity and consequently how Palestinians voice that sense of self- and nation-hood. This is mainly due to the demographics of present-day Palestinians as Refqa Abu-Remaileh points out:

> The majority of Palestinians, both inside and outside historic Palestine, range from stateless refugees to residents or citizens of numerous other countries, holding a myriad of different types of travel documents, ID cards, residencies, asylum papers, and passports. In some cases, they hold no documents at all—no official status or identity, let alone any formal Palestinian affiliation.[21]

This seemingly nebulous conception of what identifies Palestinians necessitates the consideration of what Abu-Remaileh classes as open, multiple, and hybrid identities, through the inclusion of those who self-identify as Palestinian or have contributed to Palestinian literature regardless of nationality or origin.[22] Such multiple or hybrid identities reflect the reality of writers such as Abulhawa, the daughter of displaced Palestinian parents and who spent her formative years moving between Palestine, Kuwait, Jordan and the United States. In her article, 'Born into the Wind', Abulhawa traces her experiences as a child who, abandoned and abused by both parents, was alone, without papers, without a family or land or country. She sums up the special strengths to be found in such a life:

> Like the ability to hold your head high, even when someone has their boot at your neck; the wisdom to do whatever it takes to get an education, even when you're

---

[20] Khaled Abkar Alkodimi, 'New Perspectives in the Israel-Palestine Conflict: Righting the Wrong through Metaphor in *Mornings in Jenin', International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 8.6 (2019), 132–38 <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.8n.6p.132>, p. 138.

[21] Refqa Abu-Remaileh, 'Country of Words: Palestinian Literature in the Digital Age of the Refugee', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 52.1–2 (2021), 68–96 <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341420>, p. 72.

[22] Abu-Remaileh, 2021, p. 72.

> denied a school; the freedom of shedding shame; the authenticity of living a truth, no matter how ugly, without apologies; the marvel of a body that heals itself from the intentional harm of others and rises to rebuild.[23]

Abulhawa infuses her characters in *Mornings in Jenin* with these strengths, writing women and men who experience oppression, alienation and indignity, yet nonetheless manage to find their voices. Raslan claims that Abulhawa tries to reshape cultural memory through personal contexts.[24]

The novel's multi-generational structure allows for the interweaving of the historical and socio-political context with a multiplicity of voices. *Mornings in Jenin* primarily features a third-person omniscient narrator, but it also shifts to various first-person points of view, with the narratives of Amal, Yousef and David, as well as excerpts from various sources, such as poems, radio broadcasts, songs and history books. In addition to functioning as a counter-narrative, the novel also utilises polyphony to voice different experiences of occupation and exile. In 'Discourse in the Novel', Bakhtin discusses the 'social diversity of speech types' in novels, emphasising the multiplicity of voices and the wide variety of links and interrelationships between them that form the distinguishing features of novelistic discourse.[25] This appears here in the depiction of different voices—both Palestinian and Israeli—that are all somehow connected and that express a different range of emotions and experiences.

The text is segmented into different sections that portray various points of view, switching between a third-person omniscient narrator and the first-person narration of Amal and Yousef. Also, the voices of minor as well as main characters are amplified thus highlighting the different elements of Palestinian identity; for example, the voice of Haj Salem is peppered throughout

---

[23] Susan Abulhawa, 'Born Into the Wind', *Wasafiri*, 29.4 (2014), 52–56 <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2014.949069>.
[24] Raslan, 2017, p. 187.
[25] Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263.

the story as an old man who has "seen it all" and who teaches the children of the refugee camp in Jenin Palestinian history, folklore and proverbs, also providing Amal with the names and stories of the, 'miscellaneous victims of war in the history texts'.[26] In another example, after their initial displacement to the Jenin refugee camp, the men of Ein Hod gather daily to hear the latest news from Hasan Abulheja. He reads aloud a news article about the official UN response to their plight and is met with various reactions: '"It's about time someone spoke up against this foulness […] I hope the Jews didn't mess up my house too bad […] I just want to go home"' (p. 40). This intricate layering of Hasan's voice reading a reporter's interpretation of international events and an amalgamation of refugees' voices interweaves documented historical content with more individualistic hopes to convey a broader view of Palestinian trauma. Such a strategy not only emphasises the humanity of the characters, but also points to one of the core elements of the Palestinian cause and a theme that recurs throughout the novel: the hope of return.

The use of polyphonic narrative structures highlights the representation of intersectional identities. As a diasporic Palestinian woman writer, Abulhawa can be seen to exemplify intersectionality, especially in terms of marginalisation. Nur Masalha argues that Palestinian women continue to be excluded even within the subaltern narrative, citing studies showing that 'women's voices and contribution to collective Nakba memory and Palestinian historical consciousness are doubly marginalised within the Palestinian refugee story'.[27] Abulhawa contributes to the Palestinian narrative by privileging the voices of others, especially Palestinian women, in a way that also reflects Sarnou's 'double consciousness and double voice'. Sarnou argues that 'being hybrid or hyphenated contributes to the production of texts of fiction [...] that

---

[26] Susan Abulhawa, *Mornings in Jenin*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 78. Further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.
[27] Masalha, 2012, p. 228.

are multi-vocal since many ethnic, cultural, gender and narrative voices are heard'.[28] Abulhawa achieves this, in part, by using different narrative frameworks such as newspaper articles, radio broadcasts, excerpts from history books and blog entries, a technique that helps to humanise the victims of war through the varied viewpoints and responses to the seventy-odd years of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The novel's portrayal of multiple viewpoints, both Palestinian and Israeli, also posits important questions about identity within the context of war and displacement. This is most apparent with the character of Ismael/David. He never doubts his identity as a Jewish Israeli, so when his adoptive father confesses, 'the truth of his origins […] indicted every thought, every love, every conviction that had built David into himself' (p. 78). He is deeply conflicted by the thought of these divergent identities: 'The two truths of one man, each as true as the other, opposite the other, repelling the other in an infinite struggle for David's soul. The confession shook David to the core, unhinging his deepest beliefs' (p. 256). The only way he is able to end this struggle is by accepting this doubling of identity and reconciling his conception of self with his origin as Muslim, Arab and Palestinian.

The doubling of voice can also be found in how disembodied voices impart second-hand information in the novel. Most notably, when living in diasporic exile, Amal's only access to information about her family, friends and homeland is through the voices of others, via telephone calls with relatives, news reports and, later, books and memoirs about the war. So, Amal experiences the Israeli invasion of Lebanon to fight against the PLO through the voices of news broadcasters and BBC reports. Then, her husband's fate is relayed to her by her brother's voice over the telephone: how Majid survived the bombing of the hospital where he worked, only to be killed hours later in their apartment by an Israeli bomb. Amal also experiences the deaths of her niece and sister-in-law through her brother: 'Yousef called me,

[28] Sarnou, 2016, p. 210.

screaming. *Screaming*. Even through the telephone wires, there was enough agony in his voice to break the sky' (p. 226, author's emphasis). Later, Amal reads the horrific, gruesome accounts about the use of Israeli phosphorous shells in Lebanon and the smouldering remains of infants that could not be extinguished. These written accounts function on two levels: first, they reveal facts about the civilian casualties of the war—the collateral damage of the occupation; and second, Amal's survivor's guilt makes them a form of self-flagellation: 'she read to punish herself with the intense guilt of having been spared' (p. 252). Amal also reads witness accounts of the aftermath of the massacres led by the Phalange, the Lebanese militia and its ally (the Israeli army), on the besieged refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila, aligning these with her own memories of the camp and the people she knew there. This doubling of voice, the "insider" perspective of her brother's voice and the "outsider" testimonies that she later immerses herself in, merges her personal traumatic losses with the collective reality of Palestinian history.

In addition to such strategies, the multi-voiced quality of *Mornings in Jenin* also allows for a more ambivalent depiction of the occupier, reflecting a decolonised reading of trauma. In addition to the Palestinian perspective, the novel depicts the voices of the traumatised Jewish women and men who escaped the Holocaust with both physical and psychological scars as well as those of the callous Israeli soldiers who delight in tormenting and inflicting pain on the Palestinians. Nina Fischer labels this as a form of disruptive empathy, explaining how Abulhawa acknowledges both Palestinian and Jewish pain rather than create a story that diminishes the other side's suffering, thus offering 'a rich lens to think through the entangled web of traumatic histories, contested historical narratives and different national contexts'.[29] The weaving together of all these points of view thus shows the universality of trauma, especially

[29] Fischer, 2020, p. 3.

when considering the parallels between the Palestinian and Jewish experiences of displacement and exile.

The first example of disruptive empathy is evident in the friendship between Ari Perlstein and Hasan Abulheja. It points to the possibility of peaceful coexistence in Palestine as their friendship transcends religion, ethnicity, politics and even language. When Ari and Hasan first meet as young boys in Jerusalem before the Nakba, neither is able to speak the other's language. However, united by their shared fascination with languages and books and their disinterest in the politics that lead to the growing divide between Arabs and Jews, they teach each other Arabic and German, allowing them to communicate with one another and experience the other's culture. In fact, Mrs. Perlstein provides Hasan with private tutoring after his formal schooling ends, sending him home with books and nurturing his love of education, which stands him in good stead later as a refugee in Jenin looking for work. He later imparts this love of learning and reading to his children, especially his daughter, Amal. The portrayal of this friendship allows for the voicing of what can be seen as the viewpoint of Holocaust survivors who support the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, when Ari tells Hasan in 1947: 'I think it's wrong. But you don't know what it was like before […] It killed us, what happened, even though we escaped. Have you ever noticed how empty my mother's eyes are? She's dead inside […] And now we aren't sure if we'll be safe' (pp. 23-4). Hasan's anger is directed at the policies that would see "immigrants" take the land of his forefathers away from him, and it is his empathy for the Perlstein's trauma that leads him to later risk his life to smuggle the Perlstein family away from the Arabs fighting against Israeli attempts to conquer Jerusalem, revealing how blurred the lines are in this context. 'He was like a brother' (p. 9) Hasan tells a young Amal years later in Jenin while Ari, as an old man, explains to Amal: 'After having lost his home, his

land, his son, his identity to the Jewish state, your father risked his life to save mine and my family's' (p. 289).

Disruptive empathy in *Mornings in Jenin* indicates the humanity of the occupiers as seen in the characters of Moshe and Jolanta, the couple who kidnap and raise Ismael/David. Much like the Perlsteins, their own historic trauma fuels their desire to establish a safe place where they can live without fear after the atrocities of their past. Abulhawa constructs a backstory for this couple that elicits empathy, yet still holds them accountable for their actions. Moshe is a Zionist soldier who is propelled by love to 'take—by force if necessary—whatever was needed' (p. 37) and thereby ensure the safety and happiness of his wife and people. Taking advantage of the opportunity that presents itself, he kidnaps a child to give to the wife he loves, a fragile woman who has withdrawn into herself as a result of the trauma she experienced and witnessed in the Nazi death camps. Ironically, Jolanta's trauma response is later mirrored in Dalia after she loses her son, which is a direct result of Moshe's perpetuation of the cycle of violence and loss that both he and Jolanta experienced as victims of war and circumstance. Rather than acknowledge Dalia's humanity, he tries to focus on the reparations that he believes are owed to his wife, whose barrenness arose out of the physical trauma of serving the sexual needs of the Nazis. However, Moshe is haunted by his actions: 'His gift to Jolanta in 1948 had grown into a secret too heavy to carry […] He had wanted wholeness: a homeland, a wife, a family. He had fought to save the Jewish people. But at his heels now were the awful evictions, the killings, the rapes. Moshe could not face all those faces, their voices' (p. 99). Moshe's deathbed confession reveals his feelings of guilt for kidnapping Ismael and his complicity in the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, allowing for deeper insight into his motivations while also emphasising that he cannot be exonerated.

As a trauma narrative, *Mornings in Jenin* attempts to acknowledge the pain of both sides, Palestinian and Israeli, through depicting the implications of the Nakba and the Holocaust respectively on the different characters and how it drives their decisions and actions. By layering in instances of what Fischer refers to as 'Holocaust memory' alongside the voices and memories of Palestinians, Abulhawa avoids diminishing the suffering of the other side by providing a polyphonic text that considers 'the entangled web of traumatic histories, contested historical narratives and different national contexts'.[30] This entanglement is also represented in be seen in subtle ways; for example, Yousef comforts himself in the refugee camp by counting the eighteen coins on his mother's ankle bracelet, mirroring the way his father Hasan used to count the eighteen pearls on Mrs. Perlstein's brooch while studying with her. This brooch is later revealed to be a relic of her life before the concentration camps, in yet another strategic instance of disruptive empathy that also illustrates the commonalities of the trauma experienced by both Jewish and Palestinian women.

The sociological context of *Mornings in Jenin* plays a role in how the complexities of mother-daughter relationships influence transgenerational trauma. Palestinian culture reflects Arab social identity that is constructed through the family unit. For all Arabs, the family is, 'the basic social unit around which the individual's life is centred. It provides shelter, food, clothing, protection, identity, reputation, and honor for its members, regulates their economic activities, and defines their social status in the community'.[31] Palestinian society is 'hierarchical and male-dominated, with clearly defined roles and norms for men and women and gender separation'.[32]

---

[30] Fischer, 2020, p. 3.
[31] Abudi, 2010, p. 27.
[32] Ebba Augustin, 'Introduction', in *Palestinian Women: Identity and Experience*, ed. by Ebba Augustin (London: Zed Books, 1993), p. 3.

Najah Manasra also explains how in Palestinian culture the family home is believed to be the 'fitting environment for females', with a tendency to educate female children towards self-denial and self-sacrifice as women are 'brought up to take responsibilities, to sacrifice themselves for others, accept their unjust treatment without complaints'.[33] The expectation for Palestinian daughters, then, is that they will follow in their mothers' footsteps and be obedient. This translates into dedicating themselves to maintaining the household by learning to cook and clean, for example, and self-sacrificing, adhering to patriarchal societal and filial norms rather than personal inclinations. While this is problematic from a Western feminist viewpoint, the fact remains that women within typical Arab—and, by extension, Palestinian—families do have a measure of power that arises from the home as a female-centric domain. Arab mothers, in particular, have an overwhelming influence on their children as they are the primary caregivers during the most formative years of their lives, thus playing an integral role in rearing and shaping a new generation, both male and female, and modelling patterns of behaviour that daughters are especially likely to emulate. Abudi considers the mother-daughter relationship 'the cornerstone of Arab family life' and 'the most challenging of all family relationships', arguing that this bond is a central connection between women 'is vital for the shaping of self, gender personality, and gender roles, and which has profound effects on women's individual development and choices'.[34] Understanding the dynamics of such a relationship in *Mornings in Jenin* helps further understand how female experiences are articulated.

One of the most salient aspects of female silence portrayed in this novel is how it metamorphoses from one generation of women to the next while still retaining its function as a defensive coping mechanism and a form of detachment from a traumatic reality. Parr indicates

---

[33] Najah Manasra, 'Palestinian Women: Between Tradition and Revolution', in *Palestinian Women: Identity and Experience*, ed. by Ebba Augustin (London: Zed Books, 1993), pp. 7–21, p. 9.
[34] Abudi, 2010, p. 83, p. 4.

the link between silence and trauma in her analysis of occupation narratives where violence is portrayed as the norm. She argues that, since 'there are no words sufficient to express trauma, horrendous violence can only be communicated through a profound "eloquent silence"', referring to Ephratt's use of the term to denote communicative silence.[35] An analysis of the silence of Dalia and Amal reveals the common thread of trauma that impacts their ability to communicate with others—they resort to a form of eloquent silence, which provides the measure of distance they need to protect themselves from further pain and grief. However, the women's silence proves to be a double-edged sword that can sever their ties to both family and reality.[36]

When considering the eloquent silence of Dalia and Amal, it is necessary to trace the factors that lead to this choice of coping mechanism. There are two incidents that fundamentally shape Dalia and determine how she deals with her trauma. The first occurs before the Israeli occupation when, as a young girl, she is thought to have stolen the Abulheja's horse. Her father decides to punish what he views as her insolence and to restore his honour in the centre of the village by forcing her to hold a searing hot metal brand in one hand without screaming, otherwise her other hand will also be burned. Through this extreme agony she does not utter a sound: 'Dalia pulled the pain inward […] She gripped the torture in her hand and held it there with a clench of her jaw as tears streaked her face' (p. 15). It is here that she first makes the conscious choice not to speak of or express her pain, to clench her jaw. While others are

[35] Parr, 2018, p. 58.

[36] Female silence has also been used as a form of protest and resistance in Palestine by the "Women in Black". See: Ashley Elliot Pryor, 'Gesturing toward Peace: On Silence, the Society of the Spectacle, and the "Women in Black" Antiwar Protests', in *Silence and Listening As Rhetorical Arts*, ed. by Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), pp. 180–94. The Women in Black is an anti-war, pro-peace protest movement that began in Palestine in 1988 when Israeli Jewish women began to gather in public to protest Israeli occupation, dressed in black to signify their grief and mourning (p. 187). Eventually, they took a stance of deliberate silence that 'functioned as a strategy for resisting the continuation and proliferation of violence' (p. 187). This indicates the multifunctionality of communicative silence.

unnerved by her stoicism, it is worth noting that, in this case, as Craps suggests, '[r]ather than merely a symptom of trauma, to be dispelled without a second thought, silence is also a coping mechanism, a conscious choice deserving of respect'.[37] This incident marks the birth of a mantra that later comforts her throughout all the other traumatic experiences of her life and that she teaches her children: 'Whatever you feel, keep it inside'.

The second major incident that has a monumental impact on Dalia is the loss of her younger son, Ismael. A foreshadowing of sorts occurs before this loss: she suffers a stillbirth before she becomes pregnant with Ismael, after which she enters a period of grieving, 'cloistering herself in lockjawed solitude' (p. 20). This is another indication of her automatic response to trauma and tragedy: silence. When Dalia and her family are forced from their village by the Israeli occupation during the Nakba, her six-month-old son slips from her grasp and cannot be found—this loss is even more profound than the miscarriage: 'Dalia stopped and so did time. She screamed like she hadn't when her father burned her hand. A loud, penetrating, consuming, unworldly scream from a mother's deepest agony' (p. 33). This loss strikes deep at the very core of who she is—a mother who, despite the strength of her love, could not protect her child—and it is with this realisation and this crucial moment of loss that words fail her. Her scream is a manifestation of that non-speech, the silence of pain that cannot be expressed. Although she does not vocalise it, she always clings to the hope that she will one day find Ismael, but as the days and years pass and nothing happens, she slips further into silence.

On the other hand, Amal's trauma is ingrained in her since birth, as a girl born and raised in a Palestinian refugee camp, whose everyday experiences range from extreme violence to more subtle microaggressions that are normalised as a result of the occupation. From an early

[37] Craps, 2014, p. 55.

age, she manifests the same traits as her mother, especially strength of will. She is a whirlwind of life, a reincarnation of Dalia as she once was before her spirit was smothered, a girl who is curious and 'behaved as if the world belonged to her' (p. 51). However, in addition to these inherited traits, Amal's relationship with her mother is a key component in how she deals with her trauma. Like any child, she learns from her parents and the responses and coping mechanisms they model at home, and Dalia sets an example with her silence. Therefore, despite being the main caregiver in the home, Amal learns language from her father rather than her mother. Hasan teaches Amal to read alone in the early dawn hours, fostering in her a love of poetry and the written word. For Hasan, knowledge is the only possession that the Israelis cannot take away from them, and so he instils in Amal the idea that education is her only way to escape the refugee camp. This subtle reversal of roles between mother and father highlights how Dalia's silence influences Amal's language acquisition.

One of the defining experiences of trauma for Amal takes place during the war of 1967. Also known as the Six Day War, a military alliance was formed between Egypt, Syria and Jordan and an attempt was made to fight back against Israeli forces, but it ultimately failed, resulting in Israeli control of the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights.[38] *Mornings in Jenin* depicts the Palestinian refugee response to this hope of liberation, with fighters from the Jenin camp leaving to join the Arab armies facing the Israeli forces. Mostly women, children and the elderly are left behind, and Amal's mother hides her in a makeshift shelter under their kitchen with her friend, Huda, and her infant cousin as the fighting and bombardment start. The trio are left alone for the six days of the war as the camp around them is reduced to rubble and a large number of its people killed, and they come to the awful realisation that nobody is coming to rescue them as Israeli soldiers sweep through the camp. A

[38] Pappé, 2006, p. 186.

nearby bomb exposes their hiding spot, and a stray piece of shrapnel kills the three-month-old baby as she lies in Amal's arms. Amal risks looking out and spots her mother: 'She was sitting on the ground, her eyes distant and uninhabited. She seemed not to notice when soldiers pulled up in their trucks' (p. 71). She hides again, forced to dig a tiny grave with her fingers and praying to avoid the soldiers' notice. Eventually, the two girls are found by the Red Cross and taken to relative safety, where Amal sits among hundreds of other children who survived the war, all not speaking, and she realises: 'To remain silent was to accommodate the possibility that it all was merely a nightmare' (p. 75). This incident seems to reinforce her mother's lesson of silence that offers a retreat from reality, a way to escape and hide from the horror. It also emphasises how disconnected and alone Dalia and Amal truly are. Despite this incident, Amal only realises she is following in her mother's footsteps when she reunites with Huda after four years' absence and she finds she cannot feel and express her love for Huda with the same intensity as Huda shows her:

> I think it was at that moment in my life that I first felt the coolness of my own heart and found Mama's walls cementing inside me. It frightened me to think that I could so easily do away with the pain of loss and separation (p. 155).

This fear leads her to mourn the loss of her innocence as she realises that she has come to expect that nothing endures, not even one's parents.

Dalia and Amal learn how to lock in their pain and protect themselves through experience or example, but their silence becomes more profound as mothers even as it distances them from their loved ones. Maria Ritter describes how 'massive, cumulative trauma generally proves pathogenic due to its intensity of cognitive, physical, and affective impact and duration', pointing to how 'repetitive reliving of the experience haunts the person, impairs daily

functioning, and can lead to a state of passive surrender'.[39] Dalia has to be strong, especially as a mother responsible for young children in the midst of the displacement and violence of the Nakba and subsequent crises. Her strength carries her through the loss of her infant son and the deaths of her mother-in-law, father-in-law and countless other extended family members and friends. She endures the heavy bombing of the Jenin refugee camp, and lives through the uncertainty of the imprisonment of her husband and son Yousef; although the latter returns, Hasan remains missing, presumed dead. Dalia suffers through her daughter being shot by an Israeli sniper and her eldest son leaving to find a way to fight back against the occupation. Throughout all these cumulative experiences of violence, loss, death and destruction, Dalia intentionally clenches her jaw, keeping her pain and suffering hidden within, becoming—in the eyes of her daughter—a cold and distant woman.

Dalia's relationships with her children are consequently built on a disconnect as, with each new traumatic loss, she withdraws further inside herself. Her silence is noticeable from their infancy: 'Dalia learned to be a stoic mother, communicating the demands and tenders of motherhood with the various tempers of silence' (p. 52). Dalia cannot bring herself to show love and affection to her children. She showers Amal with kisses and strokes her hair only when the latter sleeps and is unaware of these caresses. Dalia's silence is viewed by her children as a lack of emotion that they do not understand until later in life; for Amal, in particular, it becomes a challenge and a source of contention. Recalling her five-year-old self, for example, she remembers telling Dalia that she wished she had a better mother: 'I had just wanted to see if I could make her clench her teeth and bulge her jaw muscles' (p. 67). Years later, this deepens

[39] Maria Ritter, 'Silence as the Voice of Trauma', *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 74.2 (2014), 176–94 <https://doi.org/10.1057/ajp.2014.5>, p. 180.

into bitterness, revealed in how Amal describes her mother when they are reunited in the treatment tent after the bombing of the Jenin camp:

> She sat motionless in a corner […] Her spacious empty eyes did not see me standing before her. She seemed to see nothing […] a beseeching resentment filled me. I hated Mama for being in shock, whatever that was, for not being the one to put her arms around me, for always having been different from other mothers (p. 74).

Dalia thus never truly sees Amal nor, in turn, is she seen by her daughter—during her lifetime, at least—due to her dissociation through silence. It is only in the latter years of Dalia's life, after she develops dementia despite being relatively young, that Amal catches glimpses of the woman behind the seemingly emotionless façade and she begins to understand Dalia. For example, awakening from the surgery to remove the bullet from her abdomen, Amal narrates: 'I could at last see through the gaunt shell of my mother to the colorful, daring, vivacious Bedouin girl whose fire had been tamped with a hot iron and whose wits had been doused with the ashes of too much death and too many wars' (p. 119). The pathogenic effects of trauma that Ritter indicates lead to the weakening of Dalia's body as well as her mind, and when she dies in her sleep, Amal's grief reveals her mixed emotions and her perception of her mother's detachment:

> I cried, not for this woman's death, but for my mother, who had departed that body years before. I cried with a bittersweet relief that she was finally and completely rid of the whore-house world that had deflowered her spirit. I cried for the blunt impact of guilt that I could not, had not saved her somehow. I cried because, hard as I tried, I could not find in the small pale body the woman whose womb had given me life (p. 127).

After her mother's death, Amal remembers assisting her mother in a birth that culminates in Dalia teaching Amal to move an unborn baby in its mother's womb. This memory is important to her because it reminds her of Dalia's love and her pride in Amal, which she had begun to doubt over time. On another level, the memory highlights the significance of matriarchal knowledge that is passed from mother to daughter, especially knowledge that is tied to women's bodies and the female domain of childbirth. Dalia's silence means she cannot speak her trauma

to her daughter, nor even properly teach Amal to communicate, yet she still tries to maintain that bond by allowing Amal to accompany her and teaching her about midwifery and the complexities involved in delivering new life, which becomes an intrinsic part of this mother-daughter relationship.

The transgenerational effects of trauma on Amal are further complicated by her personal experiences as a wife and mother. Ruth Lijtmaer discusses the 'wounds without memory' of the children of trauma survivors who do not articulate or share their experiences: 'Lacking their parents' direct experience of devastating atrocities, they are faced with the task of assimilating such realities into consciousness through their own imagination'.[40] In *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory*, Ahmad Sa'di and Lila Abu-Lughod discuss the transference of Palestinian memory from one generation to another through stories, memories, foods, and anger, labelling it an inheritance of identity and burden.[41] Amal, born after the Nakba, shoulders some of this burden merely by growing up in the refugee camp, but she cannot fully understand her mother's trauma and silence until she herself experiences abrupt loss. Therefore, it is only when, pregnant with her own daughter and faced with the deaths of her husband, sister-in-law and niece, that she understands her mother's strategic retreat into silence: 'I stood, besieged by the trickery of destiny. By stolen futures and the unbearable sorrow of extinguished love […] I overpowered my tears with a tight clench of my jaw. I was afraid to cry, lest I feel […] *Whatever you feel, keep it inside.* Oh, Dalia, Mother! I understand!' (pp. 227-28, author's emphasis). In this text, motherhood seems to be inextricably associated with silence as it is at this point that Amal is finally able to see Dalia's true self. Amal only truly follows the example of her mother's lock-jawed defence after becoming a mother herself:

---

[40] Ruth Lijtmaer, 'Untold Stories and the Power of Silence in the Intergenerational Transmission of Social Trauma', *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 77.3 (2017), 274–84 <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org.ezproxye.bham.ac.uk/10.1057/s11231-017-9102-9>, p. 276.
[41] Sa'di and Abu-Lughod, 2007, p. 19.

> She gritted her teeth through much of her life, holding her breath as she moved through a cloud of silence. She prowled the trenches of that silence, that fear. She lost her way, lost some fundamental part of her makeup, but she knew not what it was, nor where or how to reclaim it (pp. 252-53).

Years later, articulating her feelings about Dalia to David, Amal admits that she had once thought Dalia 'a selfish, hard, efficient mother' before realising she was not emotionless, but rather, her silence hid her true self from the world. Dalia's heart 'was not of ice at all, but a roiling lava contained by her own will, held back by her iron jaw' (p. 275).

Unlike Dalia, Amal is eventually able to break the cycle of trauma and silence by speaking of the past, which allows her to assimilate her trauma and communicate it to her daughter. Much has been written on the concept of the traditional Freudian "talking cure", and it has been challenged, particularly in postcolonial trauma theory, for being used as a one-size-fits-all treatment. Claire Stocks, for example, makes the argument that it does not necessarily provide catharsis for those whose history is characterised by division and non-linearity.[42] In *Mornings in Jenin*, female silence appears to provide a measure of catharsis as it allows the characters to survive. Craps discusses the validity of silence as a coping mechanism that, in postcolonial contexts, challenges popular Western ideas about trauma treatment, through showing that silence can be beneficial in keeping trauma at bay.[43] Both Dalia and Amal take refuge in silence in an attempt to stave off the trauma of their losses and the violent aftermath of the war, which, in turn, leads to detachment and dissociation. For a time, this seems beneficial but later becomes an obstacle: for Dalia, her detachment increases until she is no longer mentally competent. Dalia was unable to explain herself during her lifetime, but Amal's trauma helps her to reconnect with her mother and see her for who and what she truly was: a woman who was, in a way, too strong. She did not yield nor bend—a result of the metal that first entered her soul as a young girl forced

---

[42] Claire Stocks, 'Trauma Theory and the Singular Self: Rethinking Extreme Experiences in the Light of Cross Cultural Identity', *Textual Practice*, 21.1 (2007), 71–92 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360601156971>, p. 88.
[43] Craps, 2014, p. 55.

to hold a searing iron in her hand without screaming. Yet this inflexibility only amplifies her trauma: 'Had she screamed, perhaps the fire would not have reached so deeply into her' (p. 15).

After losing parts of herself through silence, Amal eventually finds that speaking of her traumatic past to David and then Sara allows her to sort through her memories and thereby relive the joyful experiences of her life despite the pain. This allows her to make connections and gain insight about her life and family that were impossible and opens channels of communication that she previously denied herself. She comes to the realisation that '[s]orrow gave Dalia an iron gift. Behind that hard shelter, she loved boundlessly in the distance and privacy of her solitude, safe from the tragic rains of her fate' (p. 273). With this insight, Amal allows herself to revisit her past and to share her trauma with her own daughter. When asked why she never spoke of Sara's father, she says, '"I'm sorry, Sara." I opened my hands and unhinged my jaw. "I was afraid...so afraid of what I might feel"' (p. 300). This unclenching of her jaw means that her silence is broken on her own terms and becomes part of her healing process as she battles her fear of feeling pain. Guignery sums up why such an unclenching is important: 'By articulating their suffering, by speaking out and speaking back, the unsung and unheard fight to come to terms with the traumas they have experienced and to reconstitute a sense of self, identity, memory and history'.[44] After decades of hiding behind her silence, Amal speaks of her past and her trauma to her daughter, 'dismantling the unuttered words of a lifetime' (p. 299), and this acts as a reaffirmation of her subjectivity and identity and an acknowledgment that she is both a victim and, more importantly, a survivor.

Despite Amal's silence throughout her daughter's childhood, she enables Sara to become part of a new generation that does not carry the burdens of the past so heavily. Sara evinces the

[44] Guignery, 2009, p. 6.

same locked-jawed defences as Dalia and Amal. After meeting David, Sara expresses her desire to travel to Palestine to know who she is, and Amal realises just how little sense of belonging her daughter feels and how she mimics her when coping with that sorrow: 'she was her mother's daughter, and I watched her yank it all back inside, cover it with resolve, and concentrate it all in the burning challenge of her gaze' (pp. 281-82). Maurice Ebileeni argues that Sara merely functions as a positive emotional recipient of her mother's stories, and that she never develops an independent identity, even during their visit to Palestine together.[45] However, this does not seem to take into account this depiction of Sara's challenge nor her actions after her mother's murder: she starts a blog dedicated to her mother in which she records all her memories in the form of letters to Amal. By writing out the trauma related to witnessing her mother's death for all the world to read, Sara enacts a more blatant form of breaking the lock-jawed silence, freeing herself from the walls of fear and pain behind which Dalia and Amal hid. She breaks the cycle of transgenerational trauma through initiating a dialogue that acknowledges her own and her mother's trauma and even allows others to contribute their own stories about Amal or about their own experiences.

The medium for Sara's silence-breaking is extremely significant. The choice of a more contemporary form of technology seems to indicate a move towards the future, away from the past trauma of her mother and grandmother. Paul Arthur states that, '[i]n the twenty-first century, trauma associated with death is increasingly being worked through in communal spaces and collective formats through online memorialization […] re-contextualizing and even normalizing trauma by bringing it into everyday social settings'.[46] Sara's blog allows her to

---

[45] Maurice Ebileeni, 'Breaking the Script: The Generational Conjuncture in the Anglophone Palestinian Novel', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55.5 (2019), 628–41 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2019.1626588>, p. 634.

[46] Paul Arthur, 'Memory and Commemoration in the Digital Present', in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. by Michelle Balaev (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 152–75, p. 152.

express her trauma but also recontextualise it by commemorating her mother's history and experiences, thus allowing her voice to be heard posthumously. Furthermore, within the context of national identity in Palestinian literature, Abu-Remaileh explores the potential of the digital realm in establishing a 'country of words' in the absence of a centralised Palestinian territorial national literary sphere.[47] She argues for the 'necessity of opening up new methodological toolboxes and accessing multi-disciplinary sources [...] across a multiplicity of venues and locations' to expand the horizon of analysis and understanding of Palestinian literary history.[48] Sara's blog can be seen as an example of how such digital tools can provide a platform for Palestinian trauma narratives that contribute to the 'multi-layered, fragmentary, and hybrid story of Palestinian literature'.[49] Sara's blog draws together the fragments of her mother's story as well as those of the surviving members of the Abulheja clan. David writes his own letter of how Amal's acceptance of him allowed him to finally be content with his own conflicted identity and led him to form an unlikely friendship with her childhood friends. Yousef is also somehow able to locate Sara's blog and read his sister's news. His own unsent letters to Amal line his walls, but Sara's blog finally allows him the chance to express the words of pain and regret that he was unable to tell her in life as he sought to protect her. This digital forum thus comes to represent the meaning of Amal's name: 'Amal, with the long vowel, means hopes, dreams, lots of them' (p. 72).

The complexities of mother-daughter relationships in the novel reflect how the characters' conception of self is shaped by gendered power structures that attempt to control women. For example, Dalia is first introduced as the 'no-good Bedouin girl' (p. 12). In the eyes

---

[47] Abu-Remaileh, 2021, p. 96.
[48] Abu-Remaileh, 2021, p. 96.
[49] Abu-Remaileh, 2021, p. 88.

of the villagers, 'Dalia was like a wild gypsy, born of Bedouin poetry and colors instead of flesh and blood' (p. 14), and the women are especially hostile to this nonconforming wildness. They express the view that Dalia needs to be "broken" thus curing her of the carelessness they perceive as overtly sexual: 'Break her, beat her, teach her a lesson […] Look at her eat that orange! What shame on her family. All the boys are staring at her' (p. 14). This link between female sexuality and the Arab cultural construct of family honour hints at the taboo nature of women's bodies within Arab societies as objects that should not be seen and that need to be controlled. The village women's attitude reflects how such cultural norms become so entrenched in the collective subconscious that the women of the community themselves take on the role of enforcers, suggesting oppressive and even violent measures to ensure conformity.

The view of enforcing conformity or breaking girls when they first start to display innate signs of sexuality is also repeated in the next generation with Amal when she exhibits her mother's wildness and strength as a child. For example, when she is four, her curiosity about the difference between female and male genitalia leads her to grab her brother's penis in public. Yousef hits her as the female neighbours applaud this attempt to 'break her of the devil's habits' (p. 57). This emphasis on controlling women's bodies in both Dalia and Amal's cases can be examined through Iris Young's definition of women's oppression in gynocentric feminism as, 'the denial and devaluation of specifically feminine virtues and activities by an overly instrumentalized and authoritarian masculinist culture'.[50] This is evident in how Dalia is described as 'living at the pitiless end of her father's belt' (p. 13) and is beaten by her mother, all because she is more interested in letting the wind blow in her hair than wearing the hijab and in collecting bugs and beetles than heeding conventions. As a child and also as a woman, Dalia

[50] Iris Marion Young, 'Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 8.3 (1985), 173–83 <https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(85)90040-8>, p. 176.

is perceived as wilful and her sexual energy, represented in her connection to nature, is devalued and considered shameful as it does not conform to the expected rules of conduct for a girl in her community. This is a form of oppression that is more insidious than the immediate and more deadly oppression of the occupation. The neighbours' reactions to Amal seem to strike too close to home for Dalia, who remembers the taunts: '*Break her. Beat her. Teach her a lesson*' (p. 57, author's emphasis). She stands up for her daughter, telling Yousef: 'Don't ever hit your sister. Ever' (p. 57). Dalia also finds herself unable to physically discipline Amal as she did with her son: 'She left Amal to her own untamed whims, watching her daughter as if surveying a burning sensibility that had left her years ago and returned tenfold in her child […] Dalia had no defenses against raw vitality' (p. 52). The generational instinct to control girls through physical violence and oppression is thus broken with Amal.

The novel provides a critique of the existing Palestinian patriarchy alongside its portrayal of the Israeli occupation, highlighting how female oppression is, in a sense, doubled. With Dalia, this is represented by the fate of her gold coin ankle bracelets. These are symbolic of her sexual energy and strength of spirit: they jingle when she walks, a sound that bothers the women of the village but that also affirms her presence, especially to her son, Yousef. Even Moshe takes note of them, describing the ankle bracelets as 'defiant and pretty as she was' (p. 37) when he first encounters her with both her sons at a feast meant to consolidate a truce with the Israeli soldiers. However, one is lost when Dalia's village is bombed by Zionists in the build-up to the Nakba, foreshadowing how the violence and trauma of war result in the loss of her (sexual and natural) energy and even mental acuity. Dalia's second bracelet is not lost but freely given so her brother-in-law can buy a wheelchair after he is paralysed by Zionist bullets. This act of sacrifice for family is also significant and can be traced back to her non-conformity. As children, her brother-in-law used to secretly let her ride his horse, averting his eyes as a sign of

respect. In turn, as an adult, Dalia provides him with the means for mobility, in one sense repaying him for teaching her to ride a horse and for his acceptance of her wildness of spirit during a time when her community was unwilling to do so. Dalia's act of kindness is done in secrecy: she sells the bracelet and lays the money on her brother-in-law's doorstep. This is her own version of averting her eyes, allowing him to preserve a sense of dignity.

For Amal, the link between the war and her sense of self and sexuality is more clearly defined, perhaps because she was born under occupation in the Jenin refugee camp. The incident with her brother's penis sets the precedent for Amal to view her natural curiosity about her body—and, by extension, her sexuality—as shameful. This then exponentially increases in the aftermath of her first sexual experience as a teenager: she masturbates in the fields outside Jenin and simultaneously starts her first menses, leading her to believe that she has been transformed into a woman overnight and her world magically changed. However, she is then shot by Israeli soldiers in the abdomen as she walks back to the refugee camp, resulting in a scar that she views as her deserved punishment for breaking cultural and religious taboos through her act of sexual exploration. Amal's negative perception of her scar as a physical manifestation of shame leads to a form of body dysmorphia. She begrudges other girls the wholeness of their own bodies, feeling the 'anguish of deficiency' (p. 126) in her maimed body that leads her to pursue academic excellence and display an indifference to boys despite her dream to be loved and to be free. Contemplating her future after school in Jerusalem, she thinks: 'My awful scar, my disfigured body, made me dread marriage, which would surely bring a new flavor of rejection and abandonment' (p. 159). Even when Amal lives in the United States as a student, the scar is a sad reminder of her past that she hides and does not talk about.

Amal's scar is representative of both her physical and mental trauma, and so her self-deprecation and body dysmorphia are indicative of her inability to cope with that trauma. She

follows her mother's example in hiding behind silence, but physical intimacy allows her to form connections and communicate with others. At the orphanage in Jerusalem, for example, she listens to her friend Muna's account of how her father was assassinated in front of her at the age of four:

> At the edge of Muna's memory, I felt an unstoppable revolution inside me. No longer a girl, not yet a woman, I wondered which of us was better off—she who lived with the detailed terror of her father's death or I who lived without the knowledge of what happened to mine […] I leaned into Muna's hurt and kissed her forehead. We held each other […] She kissed my scar and we fell into sleep (p. 147).

The loss of Amal's father and his unknown fate haunts her, but listening to someone else's memories and experiences allows Amal to understand that she is not alone and that the sharing of trauma can bring catharsis. The exchange of kisses is also significant: one on the forehead to soothe the trauma of memory, and another on the scar to soothe that of the body. This kind of kiss is also repeated later with the man Amal falls in love with and marries:

> Majid saw my maimed belly […] he kissed its waves of scar tissue. He gave my body the acceptance I had been unable to give it myself. It was an act so tender it banished the shame. A scar of hatred soothed by Majid's kiss (p. 206).

With Majid, Amal finally allows herself to feel both physically and emotionally, ignoring her mother's mantra as she falls in love and dares to hope of a bright future. This marks a shift in how she perceives her body as she finds someone with whom she can share every part of herself, even her scar. Her less ambivalent attitude towards her scar is also precipitated by her pregnancy; she describes her maimed belly as 'charmed with new life' (p. 210). However, after Majid is killed, Amal reverts back to her silence and over the years she discovers that although she has aged, her scar has not. It, and thus her trauma, remains untouched by the passage of time. Her trauma only begins to heal when she returns to Palestine with Sara, when she shares her past with her daughter and then faces the soldier's bullet.

Amal's story comes back full circle: the novel opens and closes with her staring down the barrel of a gun. The nonlinearity of trauma is exemplified by how the entire events of the novel are bracketed between two moments: Amal gazing into the occupier's eyes and seeing him aim for her daughter. She sees his humanity yet the trauma that she relives in those moments points to an inevitable outcome of more pain to come. She survives the bullet of her youth only to be killed by the one intended for her daughter. Amal's silence always stopped her from expressing and experiencing the full extent of her love, but in her final moments, knowing she has saved her daughter, her 'life's loveliest song' (p. 307), allows her to finally fully immerse herself in that love and experience a euphoria and contentedness that she had always denied herself.

The silencing of Palestinians is entrenched in the postcolonial system of power enacted by the occupier and is too often accompanied by the silencing of those who would sympathise with the Palestinian cause in the mainstream media. This is evidenced by Nada Elia's experience as a Palestinian American feminist attempting self-representation:

> Although diaspora Palestinians are finally breaking through the wall of absolute censorship that once gagged us in mainstream Eurocentric discourse, many of us still regularly find ourselves in very hostile circumstances, where we are indeed invited to speak, but what we say, as we denounce our oppression, proves too jarring to our audience.[51]

The need for Palestinian self-representation is associated with the right of self-determinacy, and through literary works like *Mornings in Jenin*, different Palestinian narratives can be heard. Abulhawa explains how her initial confidence to write this novel arose from the encouragement of Hanan Ashrawi to write a narrative that is 'personal, Palestinian, and human', in addition to the influence of Edward Said, who once lamented that 'the Palestinian narrative was lacking in

---

[51] Nada Elia, 'The Burden of Representation: When Palestinians Speak Out', in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*, ed. by Evelyn Asultany, Rabab Abdulhadi, and Nadine Naber (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), pp. 141–58, p. 142.

literature'.[52] Abulhawa attempts to address these gaps through her portrayal of polyphonic Palestinian voices in this trauma narrative.

Through depicting multiple generations of the same Palestinian family in *Mornings in Jenin*, Abulhawa traces the history of the Palestinian story of war, displacement and diaspora. The question of transgenerational trauma is significant as the characters navigate the complexities of their changing sense of national identity which, in turn, impacts their ability to form connections and communicate with those around them. This is exemplified in the novel by how silence becomes an inherited trauma response that is passed from mother to daughter to granddaughter. Through dissociation and not speaking of their trauma, the female characters are able to survive but at the expense of allowing themselves to feel love or even hope. With each generation, this lock-jawed silence begins to unclench, and the characters learn that breaking the silence is not a sign of weakness, but another form of strength that is necessary for the healing of trauma. Abulhawa explores unconventional forms of discourse on more than one level. The first is through her use of disruptive empathy, which entails a multi-faceted depiction of the coloniser/occupier that does not intentionally demonise them. On another level, she points to new modes of sharing Palestine narratives through digital platforms that facilitate the breaking of silence. Silence in *Mornings in Jenin* is thus an inherited legacy, perceived as strength by the characters; however, by the end of the novel, there comes the realisation that this is a kind of strength that does not yield and does not bend and so must one day snap. This silence must be broken in one way or another or it will break its wielder.

---

[52] Susan Abulhawa, 'Author's Note', in *Mornings in Jenin*, 2011th edn (Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 325–27, p. 326, p. 327. See: 'Hanan Ashrawi', ed. by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Britannica*, 2023 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hanan-Ashrawi> [accessed 25 October 2023]: Hanan Ashrawi is a prominent Palestinian activist, legislator and educator.

Conclusion

One of the objectives of this study has been to explore how Arab women writers portray female silence in anglophone fiction and thereby establish silence as an implicit 'voice' of trauma. I have argued that silence complements speech and, moving away from its stereotypical association with lack and absence, enacts communicative functions that allow women to resist hierarchal systems, reclaim agency and express trauma. I have investigated the complex narrative structures and forms that privilege female voices in my selection of novels, especially in terms of the dialogic and polyphonic nature of the novel. Through analysing the strategic use of both speech and silence, I have shown the communicative functions of silence that express different facets of Arab women's experiences, such as introspection, self-preservation, resistance, observation and detachment.

Abudi suggests that transforming silence into words, 'requires the assumption of a new attitude to language and speech by women writers who want to get their message across'.[1] This study aims at adding to the emerging rich scholarship that is addressing this, by focusing on how the authors in the selected texts express Arab women's identity and particularly through the use of silence as unconventional discourse or—to borrow from Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin—'as a form of resistance to the dominant discourse'.[2] The typical view of silence, both in the West and the Arab world, is that it is the antithesis of communication, but my study shows how this is, in fact, not the case. For Arab women in particular, the social power structures, culturally defined norms and gendered roles within their communities enable their oppressive silencing. It is with the view of breaking this form of silence that many Arab

[1] Abudi, 2010, p. 272.
[2] Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, 'Introduction', in *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 3–16.), p. 5.

women authors choose to write. Faqir discusses how Arab women writers, 'negotiate a textual, sexual, linguistic space for themselves within a culture that is predominantly male-dominated'.[3] The authors in this study represent these kinds of spaces within their works, spaces in which their female characters in particular can voice their own narratives.

The five novels in this study exhibit different manifestations of female silence that allow for insight into Arab women's experiences and conceptions of voicing and identity. All of the female characters face some form of silencing by virtue of the patriarchal hierarchies that dominate their lives—for example, male guardians, social norms and even national and colonial power structures. However, the shift from being silenced to choosing silence signifies a move towards reclaiming a kind of voice that also represents their sense of agency. In *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*, Fatma's life both before and after marriage is characterised by silence and solitude—she does not initiate conversations, nor does she vocalise her thoughts and feelings. Her choice of silence allows her to undertake a search for a means to express her awakened sense of self; this feminine self-exploration is juxtaposed with her introspective silence. *The Golden Chariot* features female silence in varying degrees: Aziza chooses to remain silent about her stepfather's sexual abuse and her justification for killing him while Hinna breaks her silence about her own abuse and trauma only to other women within the prison. Shafiqa, on the other hand, is electively mute and does not speak to any of the other characters. These choices of silence, while not necessarily healthy or beneficial to the characters, nonetheless allow them some form of control in a world where they have too often been at the mercy of others, thus functioning as a means of self-preservation. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus initially presents as the antithesis of silence, especially since she articulates her story in her own words. However, her story reveals her choice in silence as she navigates a world that places value on her in terms of her

[3] Faqir, 1998, p. 6.

body and how breaking that silence allows her to challenge and resist the patriarchal narrative that perpetuates the systematic oppression of women. Female voices are undermined in *Pillars of Salt* when Maha and Um Saad attempt to challenge male authority, and they resort to strategic observational silence under the seemingly ever-present male gaze. This allows them to voice their own narratives despite the dominant narrative that demonises them. Finally, against a backdrop of war and displacement, Dalia and Amal utilise silence as a coping mechanism that allows them to detach from a traumatic, painful reality. This distancing of their selves leads to a disconnect from those around them even while it allows them to retain control and to survive.

These manifestations of silence reveal the intrinsic relationship between female bodies and voices. My analyses of the silences of the female characters in this study indicate how the choice of strategic silence and speech helps the women shift power dynamics away from the objectification of their bodies towards subjectivity. For example, in *Pillars of Salt*, the Storyteller, who represents dominant patriarchal discourse, is obsessed with Maha's body, and part of his strategic demonisation of her is through imposing physical supernatural transformations that render her monstrous and thus diminish the threat of her challenging patriarchal authority. However, Maha's counter-narrative asserts her own voice, and she moves from the object of men's gazes and stories to the subject of her own story. In fact, a common theme in most of the novels is the exploitation of women's bodies, and this loss of bodily autonomy can be construed as a silencing move by gendered power differentials as well as a trigger for the reclamation of female agency and voices.

The conceptualisation of a 'feminine' language that is linked to the female body and that allows women to communicate their sense of identity also appears in these novels. The clearest example is *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*, with the central character's physical transformations and the mystical marks that appear on her body as she attempts to decipher the language of the

universe. These can be perceived as instances of feminist dialogism, which are also evident in the narrative structures and language patterns utilised by the author that reflect the cyclical nature of female bodies and mirror women's experience of time. The recurrence of such structures and patterns across all five novels points to the commonalities in how the authors explore the communicative potential of female language. By means of strategic narrative forms and strategies such as the Arabesque, nested stories, multiple female storytellers and subverted binary oppositions, these novels represent different facets of female experiences. I examined how these engage with dominant patriarchal discourse through privileging female voices. Self-representation is achieved by means of communicative silence or speech, allowing the women in these works to respond to and even challenge traditional modes of narrating the experiences of Arab women by providing their own feminine dialogic counter-narratives.

The shifts in the female characters' speech and silence are precipitated by defining traumatic experiences that impact how they communicate. Each of these moments can be traced back to the national, cultural and social contexts of the novels. A clear example of this appears in *Pillars of Salt*, with the character of Maha; she challenges her brother's authority, criticises his close ties with the colonisers and refuses to sign over her rights to her inheritance. This open flouting of social and cultural norms costs her dearly—he has her committed to a mental asylum in an attempt to silence, punish and control her. Maha's subsequent silence enacts her observation of the patriarchal hierarchies that have surrounded her all her life, allowing her to provide a counter-narrative that voices her traumatic experiences. Similarly, in *Mornings in Jenin*, Dalia's punishment by burning iron as a teenager is supposedly due to her disobedience and to punish her for 'stealing' a horse—however, the punishment is more for the social perception of her nonconformity, which reflects negatively on her father from a cultural

standpoint. Her silence becomes the defence that she hides behind throughout the traumatic impact of the occupation, her displacement and, most importantly, the loss of her son.

One of the unifying themes across all five novels is the breaking of women as another facet to patriarchal control. Female strength is perceived as nonconformity and disobedience, which translates into the need to tame and break the women who exhibit power, and this is enacted through different means, some more insidious than others. In the first chapter, I explored the complex power dynamics between Fatma and her husband, Sajir, and how his emotional and sexual abuse stem from his constant need to control Fatma and her body. His attempts to assert his dominance and break her centre around confining her to the domestic sphere of the marital home, a space in which he is the only master and that she can only leave with his permission. I showed in chapters two and three how the women in *The Golden Chariot* and *Woman at Point Zero* are punished for attempting to control their own lives—whether by illicit means or otherwise—after being initially broken down by systematic oppression, abuse or even the twists of fate. Next, I considered the theme of female insanity as a social construct. Maha and Um Saad are indefinitely institutionalised as a result of their challenge to patriarchal authority, and the mental asylum functions as a means of punishment and control. Finally, in chapter five, I examined how social and cultural perceptions of nonconformity in girls label them as overtly sexual and powerful, leading to the pressure and attempts to break 'wild' girls like Dalia and Amal, but resulting in an iron strength of will in the face of pain, violence and grief. These different yet connected examples of how society is compelled to break women of their nonconformity add another dimension to how trauma is depicted in these novels. If silence is culturally and socially constructed as positive—a sign of virtue and obedience within the Arab world—then the women's strategic silences also function to maintain the illusion of conformity.

In this research, the death of the female storyteller is a trope that appears in each of these novels and that is also inherently linked to the voicing of her narrative. Each of the main female characters dies, either physically or metaphorically, after her story is revealed. Fatma confronts her husband for the first time in her life and bursts into flames and her soul joins the river of life. Aziza, imagining the thwarted attempts to escape on her golden chariot, has a heart-attack and dies in her bed. Firdaus is taken away to be executed upon the completion of her story to the doctor. Maha and Um Saad relive their traumatic memories but remain confined and forgotten in their asylum room. After finally unclenching her jaw and sharing her trauma, Amal is killed by a soldier's bullet as she protects her daughter. Nonetheless, even after their glorious or ignoble deaths, these women's stories live on, as James Hutchisson argues: 'Death might usually force the end of storytelling, but storytelling itself might be in danger of extinction, too, if fiction were not aesthetically engineered to be self-perpetuating'.[4] This self-perpetuating nature means that these women's stories come to life every time they are read.

The immortality of these narratives is also reflected in the nonlinearity of female time as portrayed in these stories: in most of the novels, the opening of the text mirrors the ending, reflecting the cyclical nature of women's bodies. The wheel turns and returns, ensuring the perpetuity and continuity of these women's stories. The question that then arises is what is the link between female death and female silence in these works? The antithetical "silence of the grave" seems to fit here: despite the perceived silencing nature of death, the women's narratives—and thus, their voices—live on after their deaths. In fact, their voices live on in spite of and because of their deaths.

---

[4] James M. Hutchisson, 'Storytelling, Narrative Authority, and Death in "The Thousand and Second Tale of Scheherazade"', in *Edgar Allan Poe: Beyond Gothicism*, ed. by James M. Hutchisson (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2011), pp. 45–53, p. 50.

The death of Shahrazad features in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade' and is posited as the 'true' ending for the (in)famous female storyteller in this critique of Orientalist discourse.[5] In his parody of *The Thousand and One Nights*, Poe mimics the complex narrative structure of the original by using multiple narrators, character dialogue and framing techniques although these are all coloured by his satire. Poe's version of this tale ends when the king abruptly interrupts Shahrazad's growingly preposterous tale: '"Stop![…] I can't stand that, and I won't. You have already given me a dreadful headache with your lies […] do you take me for a fool? Upon the whole, you might as well get up and be throttled"'.[6] The premise of *The Thousand and One Nights* is voiced through the king's belief that Shahrazad's stories are constructed to fool him. Also, interestingly, the narrator claims earlier that Shahrazad is 'lineally descended from Eve', from whom she inherited the 'seven baskets of talk' and made them seventy-seven.[7] This, coupled with the meta-textuality of the king's speech, emphasises the matriarchal nature and power of female narrative—or 'talk'—with this link to the first woman—despite being associated with deception, these narratives continue to grow and evolve with each descendant. The significance of female narrative is also indicated in Shahrazad's death scene:

> [S]he knew the king to be a man of scrupulous integrity, and quite unlikely to forfeit his word, she submitted to her fate with a good grace. She derived, however, great consolation, (during the tightening of the bowstring,) from the reflection that much of the history remained still untold, and that the petulance of her brute of a husband had reaped for him a most righteous reward, in depriving him of many inconceivable adventures.[8]

---

[5] For more details on this, see Haitham Talafha, 'Meta-Orientalist Critique in Poe's "Scheherazade"', *The International Journal of Literary Humanities*, 16.3 (2018), 1–15 <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-7912/CGP/v16i03/1-15>.

[6] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade', in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Project Gutenberg, 2021), ii.

[7] Poe, 2021.

[8] Poe, 2021.

Shahrazad is fearless in the face of death: the nonchalance with which she accepts her fate is juxtaposed with her oxymoronic view of her husband as both a man of integrity and a petulant brute. By killing her before the end of the tale, the king ensures that Shahrazad takes her 'untold' stories with her to the grave, which is both his reward and punishment.

Shahrazad's ending, symbolising the death of the female story-teller, can be interpreted in many ways. For example, Fatima Mernissi claims that Shahrazad is killed as if she knew too much.[9] On the other hand, Hutchinson suggests that she loses her life because she, 'violates the delicate interdependency of the author-reader contract' whereby, 'readers enter into complicity with writers and create the illusion of the writer's mastery over meaning'.[10] I argue that Shahrazad's ending points to the perceived dominance of patriarchal narratives over woman's counter-narratives: the king stops Shahrazad's tale and executes her, thereby asserting his power over her voice. However, more importantly, Shahrazad's death signifies the importance of the tale over the teller, pointing to the immortality of the storyteller's narrative or language. Despite her impeding death, she knows that she is in a position of power because she still holds on to her 'untold' tales. Although she dies, her narrative still exists in some form and cannot be truly lost, as evident by the fact that her story lives on in the form of Poe's text. Thus, the storyteller never truly dies.

The women storytellers in each of the five novels in this study die and are resurrected with each reading of their tales, yet their endings also indicate that death might not be the end for them. After her body bursts into flames, Fatma's soul joins the River of Life. Aziza's ending alludes to the potential for escape: she dies trying to reach the chariot that will take her to heaven.

---

[9] Jane Hiddleston, '"The Woman Who Said 'No'": Colonialism, Islam, and Feminist Resistance in the Works of Assia Djebar', *in Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory*, ed. by Robin Truth Goodman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 230–42 <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316422007.017>, p. 238.
[10] Hutchisson, 2011, p. 51.

The Storyteller envisages a happy ending for Maha that belies her indefinite confinement to the asylum. Firdaus's voice lives on in the doctor and author, much like Amal's memories live on in perpetuity through her daughter's online blog. Faris argues that *The Thousand and One Nights* begins and ends with Shahrazad but does not describe the story of Shahrazad herself, and that her story 'ends with an exit to the world that includes death'.[11] The deaths of the female storytellers in these novels project their voices into the world, moving their stories from the margins and into the centre and thereby ensuring that their voices and their stories live on forever.

[11] Faris, 1982, p. 815.

Bibliography

Abdo, Diya M., 'How to Be a Successful Double Agent: (Dis)Placement as Strategy in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*', in *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. by Layla Al Maleh, Cross/Cultures (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), 237–69

Abdullah, Omar Mohammed, Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya, Hardev Kaur, and Manimangai Mani, 'Kristevan Abjection in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*', *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 6.6 (2015), 80–86

———, 'Manifestations of Hysteria in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*', *3L, Language, Linguistics, Literature; Selangor*, 21.3 (2015), 99–107

Abudi, Dalya, *Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's Literature: The Family Frontier* (Boston: BRILL, 2010)

Abulhawa, Susan, 'Author's Note', in *Mornings in Jenin*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 325–27

———, 'Born Into the Wind', *Wasafiri*, 29.4 (2014), 52–56 <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2014.949069>

———, *Mornings in Jenin*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2010)

Abu-Lughod, Lila, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016)

Abu-Remaileh, Refqa, 'Country of Words: Palestinian Literature in the Digital Age of the Refugee', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 52.1–2 (2021), 68–96 <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570064x-12341420>

———, 'The Three Enigmas of Palestinian Literature', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 48.3 (2019), 21–25 <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2019.48.3.21>

Abu-Shomar, Ayman, 'Unreconciled Strivings of "Exilic Consciousness": Critical Praxis of Resistance in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*', *Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, 18.1 (2019), 101–20 <https://doi.org/10.3366/hlps.2019.0204>

———, 'Diasporic Reconciliations of Politics, Love and Trauma: Susan Abulhawa's Quest for Identity in *Mornings in Jenin*', *Advances in Language and Literary Studies; Footscray*, 6.2 (2015), 127–36

Acheson, Kris, 'Silence as Gesture: Rethinking the Nature of Communicative Silences', *Communication Theory*, 18.4 (2008), 535–55 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2008.00333.x>

Adams, Ricci-Jane, 'Magical Feminism: The Paradoxical Pain in *Fefu and Her Friends* by Maria Irene Fornes and *The Eisteddfod* by Lally Katz', *Double Dialogues*, 6, (2005)

Addison, Catherine, 'Radical Feminism and Androcide in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*', *English Studies in Africa*, 63.2 (2020), 1–13 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00138398.2020.1852683>

Akhtar, Salman, and Mary Kay O'Neil, eds., *On Freud's 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'* (London: Karnac, 2011)

Al-Ali, Nadje, *Gender Writing/Writing Gender: The Representation of Women in a Selection of Modern Egyptian Literature* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994)

———, *Secularism, Gender and the State in the Middle East: The Egyptian Women's Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

Albirini, Abdulkafi, *Modern Arabic Sociolinguistics: Diglossia, Variation, Codeswitching, Attitudes and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2015) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315683737>

Alem, Raja, *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*, ed. by Tom McDonough (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002)

Alkodimi, Khaled Abkar, 'New Perspectives in the Israel-Palestine Conflict: Righting the Wrong through Metaphor in *Mornings in Jenin*', *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 8.6 (2019), 132–38 <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.8n.6p.132>

Al-Musawi, M., *The Postcolonial Arabic Novel: Debating Ambivalence* (Leiden: BRILL, 2003)

Al-Nowaihi, Magda M., 'Reenvisioning National Community in Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot Does Not Ascend to Heaven*', *The Arab Studies Journal*, 7/8.2/1 (1999), 8–24

———, 'Resisting Silence in Arab Women's Autobiographies', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 33.4 (2001), 477–502

Alqahtani, Suaad, 'Western Feminism or Return to Authentic Islam? Jordanian Women in Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* and *My Name Is Salma*', *Arab World English Journal For*

Translation and Literary Studies, 1.2 (2017), 77–91 <https://doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol1no2.7>

Al-Rasheed, Madawi, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Al-Samman, Hanadi, *Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writings* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015)

Al-Sharqi, Laila, 'Magical Realism as Feminist Discourse in Raja *Alem's Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*', *English Language and Literature Studies*, 6.2 (2016), 58–71 <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v6n2p58>

Al-Sudairy, Hend T., 'A New Reading of the Serpent Myth in the Ancient and Modern Arab Culture', *Studies in Literature and Language*, 6.1 (2013), 54–59

Amireh, Amal, 'Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World', *Signs*, 26.1 (2000), 215–49

———, 'Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers', *Al Jadid*, 2.10 (1996) <https://www.aljadid.com/content/publishing-west-problems-and-prospects-arab-women-writers> [accessed 22 November 2021]

Arthur, Paul, 'Memory and Commemoration in the Digital Present', in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. by Michelle Balaev (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 152–75

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 'Postcolonialism/Post-Colonialism', in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 204–9

Augustin, Ebba, 'Introduction', in *Palestinian Women: Identity and Experience*, ed. by Ebba Augustin (London: Zed Books, 1993)

Badran, Margot, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994)

Badry, Roswitha, 'Socially Marginalised Women in Selected Narratives of Egyptian Female Writers', *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis*, 13.4 (2018), 257–69 <https://doi.org/10.4467/20843933ST.18.022.9475>

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981)

———, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. by Caryl Emerson, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984)

Bakr, Salwa, *The Golden Chariot*, trans. by Dinah Manisty, (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1991)

———, 'Writing as a Way Out', in *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. by Fadia Faqir, trans. by Shirley Eber (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 35–39

Balaev, Michelle, 'Literary Trauma Reconsidered', in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. by Michelle Balaev (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 1–14

Ball, Anna, 'Between '*Awra* and Arab Literary Feminism Sexual Violence and Representational Crisis in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*', in *Feminism,*

Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation, ed. by Sorcha Gunne and Zoe Brigley Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 71–84

Bauer, Dale, and Susan McKinstry, 'Introduction', in *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, ed. by Dale Bauer and Susan McKinstry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 1–6

Bernard, Anna, *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration and Israel/Palestine* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013) <https://doi.org/10.5949/liverpool/9781846319433.001.0001>

Bier, Laura, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011)

Bond, Lucy, and Stef Craps, *Trauma* (Oxon: Routledge, 2019)

Botman, Selma, *Engendering Citizenship in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999)

Brouillette, Sarah, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007)

Brown, Laura, 'Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma', *American Imago*, 48.1 (1991), 119–33

Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996)

Cixous, Hélène, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1.4 (1976), 875–93

cooke, miriam, 'Foreword', in *Woman at Point Zero*, by Nawal El Saadawi, trans. by Sherif Hetata, (London: Zed Books, 1983)

———, 'Nawal El Saadawi: Writer and Revolutionary', in *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory*, ed. by Robin Truth Goodman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 214–29

Cowan, James, 'She's Always Free to Dream: Saudi Arabian Writer Raja Alem Mixes Islam, Paganism and Magic in Her Work', *National Post*, 30 October 2002, Toronto edition <https://www.proquest.com/docview/329968095/abstract/4ACC645CA9334D0BPQ/1> [accessed 14 October 2021]

Craps, Stef, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

———, 'Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age', in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 45–61

Crenshaw, Kimberle, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241–99 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

Djebar, Assia, 'Introduction to Nawal Al-Saadawi's Ferdaous: A Voice from Hell', in *Opening the Gates: An Anthology of Arab Feminist Writing*, ed. by Margot Badran and miriam cooke, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), pp. 387–93

Douglas, Roxanne, 'Situating Arab Women's Writing in a Feminist "Global Gothic": Madness, Mothers and Ghosts', *Feminist Theory*, 24.3 (2021), 1–19 <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211019188>

Duncan, Patti, *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2004)

Ebileeni, Maurice, 'Breaking the Script: The Generational Conjuncture in the Anglophone Palestinian Novel', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55.5 (2019), 628–41 <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2019.1626588>

Eid, Mushira, 'Language Is a Choice: Variation in Egyptian Women's Written Discourse', in *Language Contact and Language Conflict in Arabic*, ed. by Aleya Rouchdy (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), pp. 203–32

El Saadawi, Nawal, *Woman at Point Zero*, trans. by Sherif Hetata, (London: Zed Books, 1983)

El Sadda, Hoda, 'Women's Writing in Egypt: Reflections on Salwa Bakr', in *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives*, ed. by Deniz Kandiyoti (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), pp. 127–44

El-Enany, Rasheed, 'The Madness of Non-Conformity: Woman versus Society in the Fiction of Salwā Bakr', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 37.3 (2006), 376–415

Elia, Nada, 'The Burden of Representation: When Palestinians Speak Out', in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*, ed. by Evelyn Asultany, Rabab Abdulhadi, and Nadine Naber (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), pp. 141–58

Ephratt, Michal, 'The Functions of Silence', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40.11 (2008), 1909–38 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.03.009>

Faqir, Fadia, 'Conclusion', in *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. by Fadia Faqir, trans. by Shirley Eber (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 159–80

———, ‘Introduction’, in *The Golden Chariot*, by Salwa Bakr, trans. by Dinah Manisty, Arab Women Writers (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1991), pp. 1–11

———, ‘Introduction’, in *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. by Fadia Faqir, trans. by Shirley Eber (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 1–23

———, *Pillars of Salt* (London: Quartet Books, 1996)

———, ‘Stories from the House of Songs’, in *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. by Fadia Faqir, trans. by Shirley Eber (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 51–61

———, “You arrive at a truth, not the truth”: An Interview with Fadia Faqir, 2011 <https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/1320> [accessed 16 March 2023]

Faris, Wendy B., ‘1001 Words: Fiction Against Death’, *The Georgia Review*, 36.4 (1982), 811–30

———, ‘Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction’, in *Magical Realism*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 163–90 <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822397212-010>

———, ‘The Question of the Other: Cultural Critiques of Magical Realism’, *Janus Head*, Magical Realism, 5.2 (2002)

Felman, Shoshana, ‘Education and Crisis or the Vicissitudes of Teaching’, in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1–56

———, ‘Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy’, *Diacritics*, 5.4 (1975), 2–10 <https://doi.org/10.2307/464958>

Fischer, Nina, ‘Entangled Suffering and Disruptive Empathy: The Holocaust, the Nakba and the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict in Susan Abulhawa’s *Mornings in Jenin*’, *Memory Studies*, 15.4 (2020), 1–18 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698019896850>

Fivush, Robyn, ‘Speaking Silence: The Social Construction of Silence in Autobiographical and Cultural Narratives’, *Memory*, 18.2 (2010), 88–98 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09658210903029404>

Foucault, Michel, ‘Of Other Spaces’, trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22–27 <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648>

Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979)

Gohar, Saddik, ‘Empowering the Subaltern in *Woman at Point Zero*’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 17.4 (2016), 174–89

Golley, Nawar Al-Hassan, ‘Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women?’, *Third World Quarterly*, 25.3 (2004), 521–36

Guignery, Vanessa, ‘Introduction: So Many Words, So Little Said’, in *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English*, ed. by Vanessa Guignery (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2009), pp. 1–8

Hafez, Sabry, ‘Intentions and Realisation in the Narratives of Nawal El-Saadawi’, *Third World Quarterly*, 11.3 (1989), 188–98

———, ‘The New Egyptian Novel’, *New Left Review*, 64 (2010), 46–62

Harlow, Barbara, *Resistance Literature* (London: Methuen, 1987)

Hedges, Elaine, and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, ‘Introduction’, in *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism*, ed. by Elaine Hedges and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 3–16

Herndl, Diane Price, ‘The Dilemmas of a Feminine Dialogic’, in *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, ed. by Dale M. Bauer and S. Jaret McKinstry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 7–24

Herzog, Thomas, ‘Orality and the Tradition of Arabic Epic Storytelling’, in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. by Karl Reichl (Berlin: De Gruyter, Inc., 2011), pp. 629–51

Hitchcock, Peter, *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992)

———, ‘The Eye and the Other: The Gaze and the Look in Egyptian Feminist Fiction’, in *The Politics Of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. by Obioma Nnaemeka (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 70–82

Holquist, Michael, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 1990)

Hutchisson, James M., ‘Storytelling, Narrative Authority, and Death in “The Thousand and Second Tale of Scheherazade”’, in *Edgar Allan Poe: Beyond Gothicism*, ed. by James M. Hutchisson (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2011), pp. 45–53

Jameson, Fredric, ‘Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism’, *Social Text*, 15, 1986, 65–88 <https://doi.org/10.2307/466493>

Jaquette, Elisabeth, 'ArabLit Re-Runs: Salwa Bakr on "Women and Arabic Literature"', *ArabLit and ArabLit Quarterly*, 16 June 2014 <https://arablit.org/2014/06/16/arablit-re-runs-salwa-bakr-on-women-and-arabic-literature/> [accessed 10 April 2022]

Jarmakani, Amira, 'Arab American Feminisms: Mobilizing the Politics of Invisibility', in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging*, ed. by Evelyn Asultany, Nadine Naber, and Rabab Abdulhadi (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), pp. 227–41

Khalil, Amr, and Larina Tatiana, 'Arabic Forms Of Address: Sociolinguistic Overview', ed. by I. V. Denisova, *Word, Utterance, Text: Cognitive, Pragmatic and Cultural Aspects*, 39. European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences (2018), 299–309 <https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2018.04.02.44>

Kilito, Abdelfattah, 'Is *A Thousand and One Nights* a Boring Book?', in *Arabs and the Art of Storytelling: A Strange Familiarity*, ed. by Roger Allen, trans. by Mbarek Sryfi and Eric Sellin (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), pp. 116–25

Kristeva, Julia, 'Women's Time', trans. by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs*, 7.1 (1981), 13–35

Lanser, Susan Sniader, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018)

Latham, Monica, 'Breaking the Silence and Camoflauging Voices in Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin'*, in *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English*, ed. by Vanessa Guignery (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2009), pp. 130–47

Laub, Dori, 'Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening', in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 57–74

Lazreg, Marnia, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (London: Routledge, 1994)

Letiche, Hugo, 'Polyphony and Its Other', *Organization Studies*, 31.3 (2010), 261–77 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609357386>

LeVine, Mark, and Gershon Shafir, 'A State Is Born; A Nation Is Dispersed', in *Struggle and Survival in Palestine/Israel*, ed. by Mark LeVine and Gershon Shafir (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), pp. 154–58

Lijtmaer, Ruth, 'Untold Stories and the Power of Silence in the Intergenerational Transmission of Social Trauma', *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 77.3 (2017), 274–84 <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxye.bham.ac.uk/10.1057/s11231-017-9102-9>

Lodge, David, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1990)

Malti-Douglas, Fedwa, *Men, Women, and God(s): Nawal El Saadawi and Arab Feminist Poetics* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995)

———, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991)

Mami, Fouad, 'Postcolonial Predicaments: Encumbering the Emancipatory Potential in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63.1 (2022), 14–27 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2020.1799742>

Manasra, Najah, 'Palestinian Women: Between Tradition and Revolution', in *Palestinian Women: Identity and Experience*, ed. by Ebba Augustin (London: Zed Books, 1993), pp. 7–21

Manisty, Dinah, 'Madness as Textual Strategy in the Narratives of Three Egyptian Women Writers', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 14 (1994), 152–74 <https://doi.org/10.2307/521770>

———, Email to Diana Shahin, 'Hello from OCIS Library', 26 October 2022

Masalha, Nur, *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory* (London: Zed Books, 2012)

McDonough, Tom, 'Afterword', in *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*, by Raja Alem, ed. by Tom McDonough (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002)

———, 'Raja Alem by Tom McDonough', *BOMB Magazine*, 1 April 2008 <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/raja-alem/> [accessed 12 January 2022]

McKee, Elizabeth, 'The Political Agendas and Textual Strategies of Levantine Women Writers', in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. by Mai Yamani (Reading: Garnet, 1996), pp. 105–39

Mende, Claudia, 'Profile of the Egyptian Writer Salwa Bakr: The Voice of the Marginalized', *Qantara.De*, 2012 <https://en.qantara.de/content/profile-of-the-egyptian-writer-salwa-bakr-the-voice-of-the-marginalized> [accessed 10 April 2022]

Minh-ha, Trinh T., 'Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference', in *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and*

Critical Perspectives by Women of Color, ed. by Gloria Anzaldúa (San Fransisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1990), pp. 371–75

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)

Moore, Lindsey, *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film*, Transformations (London: Routledge, 2008)

———, 'Space, Embodiment, Identity and Resistance in the Novels of Fadia Faqir', in *Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*, ed. by Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013) pp. 246–68

Morris, Benny, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

Mostafa, Dalia Said, 'Literary Representations of Trauma, Memory, and Identity in the Novels of Elias Khoury and Rabī' Jābir', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 40.2 (2009), 208–36 <https://doi.org/10.1163/008523709X12470367870065>

Mustafa, Wael, 'Scheherazade Unbowed: Muslim Arab Women Diaspoetics in Fadia Faqir's *The Cry of the Dove* (2007)', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63.3 (2022), 257–68 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2021.2006597>

Norrick, Neal R., *Conversational Narrative: Storytelling in Everyday Talk* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000)

Orouq, Ayham Abu, 'A Double Colonization: The Case of the Arab Bedouin Woman in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*', *Romanian Journal of English Studies*, 18.1 (2021), 76–87 <https://doi.org/10.1515/rjes-2021-0009>

Palmer, Eustace, 'Nawal El Saadawi and the Female Predicament: A Study of *Woman at Point Zero*', *Journal of the African Literature Association*, 7.2 (2013), 88–114 <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2013.11690209>

Pappé, Ilan, *A History of Modern Palestine: One Land, Two Peoples* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

Parpart, Jane L., and Swati Parashar, 'Introduction: Rethinking the Power of Silence in Insecure and Gendered Sites', in *Rethinking Silence, Voice and Agency in Contested Gendered Terrains: Beyond the Binary*, ed. by Jane L. Parpart and Swati Parashar (Oxon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–15

Parr, Nora, 'No More "Eloquent Silence": Narratives of Occupation, Civil War, and Intifada Write Everyday Violence and Challenge Trauma Theory', *Middle East - Topics & Arguments*, 11 (2018), 58–68 <https://doi.org/10.17192/meta.2018.11.7792>

Pier, John, 'Narrative Levels', in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. by Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, and Wolf Schmid, 2nd edn (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 547–63

Poe, Edgar Allan, 'The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade', in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Project Gutenberg, 2021), ii

Pryor, Ashley Elliot, 'Gesturing toward Peace: On Silence, the Society of the Spectacle, and the "Women in Black" Antiwar Protests', in *Silence and Listening As Rhetorical Arts*, ed. by Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), pp. 180–94

P.V., Amith Kumar, *Bakhtin and Translation Studies: Theoretical Extensions and Connotations* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2016)

Rashid, Fawzia, 'Writing and the Pursuit of Female Identity', in *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. by Fadia Faqir, trans. by Shirley Eber (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 121–29

Raslan, Iman, 'Trauma and Resistance in Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*', *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies*, 17.1 (2017) 183–202 <http://www.ijaes.net/article/FullText/10?volume=17&issue=1>

Ritter, Maria, 'Silence as the Voice of Trauma', *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 74.2 (2014), 176–94 <https://doi.org/10.1057/ajp.2014.5>

Sa'di, Ahmad, and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)

Saiti, Ramzi, and Ramzi M. Salti, 'Paradise, Heaven, and Other Oppressive Spaces: A Critical Examination of the Life and Works of Nawal El-Saadawi', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 25.2 (1994), 152–74

Salah, Trish, 'What Does Tiresias Want?', *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 4.3–4 (2017), 632–38 <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-4190001>

Sarnou, Dallel, 'The Polyphonic, Dialogic Feminine, Narrative Voice in Anglophone Arab Women's Writings', *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 8.3 (2016), 202–12 <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v8n3.21>

Saville-Troike, Muriel, 'The Place of Silence in an Integrated Theory of Communication', in *Perspectives on Silence*, ed. by Deborah Tannen and Muriel Saville-Troike (New Jersey: Ablex, 1985), pp. 3–18

Sayigh, Rosemary, 'On the Exclusion of the Palestinian Nakba from the "Trauma Genre"', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 43.1 (2013), 51–60 <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2013.43.1.51>

———, 'Roles and Functions of Arab Women: A Reappraisal', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 3.3 (1981), 258–74

Seu, Bruna, 'Shameful Silences: Self-Protective Secrets and Theoretical Omissions', in *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, ed. by Róisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 257–72

Seymour-Jorn, Caroline, 'A New Language: Salwa Bakr on Depicting Egyptian Women's Worlds', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 11.2 (2002), 151–76 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1066992022000007808>

———, *Cultural Criticism in Egyptian Women's Writing* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011)

Showalter, Elaine, 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness', *Critical Inquiry*, 8.2 (1981), 179–205

Sinno, Nadine, 'From Confinement to Creativity: Women's Reconfiguration of the Prison and Mental Asylum in Salwa Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* and Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 42.1 (2011), 67–94

Snaije, Olivia, 'The Many Lives and Languages of a Palestinian Novel', *Publishing Perspectives*, 21 March 2012 <https://publishingperspectives.com/2012/03/the-many-lives-and-languages-of-a-palestinian-novel/> [accessed 18 August 2020]

Stewart, Veronica, 'Feminizing Bakhtin', *The Minnesota Review*, 41–42 (1993), 133–38

Stocks, Claire, 'Trauma Theory and the Singular Self: Rethinking Extreme Experiences in the Light of Cross Cultural Identity', *Textual Practice*, 21.1 (2007), 71–92 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360601156971>

Suyoufie, Fadia, 'The Appropriation of Tradition in Selected Works of Contemporary Arab Women Writers', *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 39.2 (2008), 216–49

Tarabishi, Georges, *Woman Against Her Sex: A Critique of Nawal El-Saadawi* (London: Saqi Books, 1988)

Taylor, Jacqueline, 'Thinking Difference Differently: An Exploration of *l'écriture féminine*, Women's Art Practice, and Postfeminism', *Esprit Créateur*, 58.2 (2018), 41–55 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/esp.2018.0018>

Tell, Tariq, 'The Social Origins of Mandatory Rule in Transjordan', in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of the Middle East Mandates*, ed. by Cyrus Schayegh and Andrew Arsan (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 212–24

Thampy, Chitra Susan, 'Nawal El Saadawi: Attaining Catharsis through Trauma Narration in *Woman at Point Zero*', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22.6 (2021), 36–42

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, ed., 'Hanan Ashrawi', *Britannica*, 2023 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hanan-Ashrawi> [accessed 25 October 2023]

Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic : A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975)

Vidler, Anthony, and Michel Foucault, 'Heterotopias', trans. by Pamela Johnston, *AA Files*, 69 (2014), 18–22

Visser, Irene, 'Trauma and Power in Postcolonial Literary Studies', in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. by M. Balaev (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), pp. 106–29

Viswanathan, Uma, 'Polyphony of Midnight's Children: Dispersion of Voices and Genres in *Midnight's Children*', *Acta Scientiarum: Language and Culture*, 32.1 (2010), 51–59

Warner, Marina, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (London: Vintage, 2012)

Warnes, Christopher, and Kim Anderson Sasser, 'Introduction', in *Magical Realism and Literature*, ed. by Christopher Warnes and Kim Anderson Sasser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 1–10 <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108551601.001>

Wynn, L. L., *Love, Sex, and Desire in Modern Egypt: Navigating the Margins of Respectability* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018)

Young, Iris Marion, 'Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 8.3 (1985), 173–83 <https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(85)90040-8>

Yousef, Tawfiq, 'Postcolonialism Revisited: Representations of the Subaltern in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*', *Sino-US English Teaching*, 13.5 (2016) <https://doi.org/10.17265/1539-8072/2016.05.007>

Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris, 'Introduction: Daiquiri Birds and Flaubertian Parrot(ie)s', in *Magical Realism*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 1–11 <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822397212-001>

Zannoun, Ghadir K., 'Fantasy, Mysticism, and Eroticism in Raja Alem's *Fatma*', *Kohl: A Journal for Gender and Body Research*, 1.2 (2015), 44–55